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"I CAN'T LET HIM GO, I MUST SAVE HIM"

The Invaders

Page 349, Frontispiece

The Invaders

A Story of the
"Hole-in-the-Wall" Country

BY

Jacques
~~JOHN~~ LLOYD
Morgan

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The Invaders.

THE INVADERS.

CHAPTER I.

WESTWARD HO!

A VAGRANT beam from the late afternoon sun struggled audaciously through the heavy curtains, which shut out the curious gaze of the passing rabble, and gave the somber club-room a momentary cheerfulness which would have disgraced the steward and horrified the house-committee, had they have been there to observe it. The sunbeam was garishly inharmonious, for the club was an awesome and austerely gloomy place. The woodwork and the expensively decorated walls were all in dark subdued tones, and the furniture was of funereal ebony. A line of portraits of past-presidents, some of them over a century old, glared down from their places on the walls so malevolently that visitors and new members found themselves conversing in whispers, and the servants, moving with catlike tread, were in the habit of glancing apprehen-

sively over their shoulders as though they feared the scowling old dignitaries would suddenly leap from the heavy gilt frames and spring upon them. A few old gentlemen dozed in the massive leathern chairs, and a scattered dozen others sat silently and solemnly about as though fearful that some sudden movement or activity on their part would disturb the quiet atmosphere of the place and brand them for all-time with the horrible and everlasting stigma of the vulgarian.

In the adjacent room, Walter Harper, successful lawyer, raconteur, and wit, snapped his watch impatiently.

"Ten minutes past five, and Thorpe not here," he muttered. "His note said 'five sharp'."

Even as he spoke a tall athletic young man entered and hastily removing his topcoat handed it to a servant.

"Just a trifle late, old man. Couldn't be helped. Been on the jump all day. How long have you waited?" And with these explanations and the query in almost the same breath John Thorpe sank into the luxurious chair beside his friend, at the same time ringing the silver bell upon the small table between them.

"A rye highball," said Harper to the servant, ignoring for the moment Thorpe's question.

"The same," said Thorpe, impatiently dismissing the waiter with a wave of his hand.

Harper lit a cigarette and settled back comfortably in his chair.

"I have been waiting only about a quarter of an hour, but a devilish tedious task it has been. Why didn't you make the appointment for some other club, or even some hotel? Heaven knows I'm refined," he continued solemnly, "but this heavy atmosphere of inordinate respectability, this ultra-conservatism, this air, which fairly reeks with exclusiveness, oppresses me. Why, it was only after my eyes got accustomed to this genteel gloom that I discovered that those strange objects," and he pointed to the dozing old gentlemen, "were not a dynasty of Egyptian kings in the imperial sarcophagus, but merely club-members——"

"Oh shut up!" interrupted Thorpe, "I have something to tell you."

"But how did you happen to select this place?" insisted Harper.

"Because it is the nearest one to the station—I catch a train after dinner."

"Boston or Philadelphia?" inquired Harper, with a broad smile. "If I remember correctly you have one in each place. In Boston resides your freckled and ungrammatical inamorata, Birdie——"

"Harper, arn't you ever serious! To-night is the last time I'll see you for a long time, for things have happened within the last few days that have changed all my plans."

"I think I know what one of them is," said Harper, suddenly becoming grave. "It's New York Northern, isn't it?"

Thorpe nodded. "It went into the hands of a receiver yesterday. The bondholders are going to foreclose and the stock won't be worth the paper it's printed on."

"Had you unloaded?"

"Not a share."

"How hard are you hit?"

"It breaks me—that's all. Every dollar I had in the world was in that stock."

Harper gave a low whistle of surprise, then he leaned back in his chair, and for a time drummed his fingers reflectively upon the table, while Thorpe contemplated him in gloomy silence.

"Well, it's too bad," Harper ventured at last. "But of course, John, if you—if you want anything just say the word—what's mine is yours."

Thorpe laughed.

"I knew you'd say that—you fat, emotional old woman, you," he said fondly. "No, it's not as bad as that, for I have been busy to-day disposing of some personal effects, and I have managed to raise a trifle less than six thousand. I sold everything—made a clean sweep from law books to polo ponies."

"Six thousand," repeated Harper meditatively,

six thousand will last you precisely six months—with strict economy."

"But, my dear fellow," expostulated Thorpe, "you forget that I am going away."

"Where?" inquired Harper absently.

"Er—west—Wyoming, I think."

"Wyoming!" exclaimed Harper, suddenly aroused. "Great Scott, man, you are not going out there—to live?"

Thorpe nodded.

Harper stared at his companion with a dazed incredulity. For a long time John Thorpe had been his best and most inseparable friend—and now the inevitable parting was to come at last. Vaguely his mind reached back to college days when Thorpe, his pal and room-mate, had achieved every eminence dear to college youth—a fair proficiency in study, a tremendous popularity, and that which Thorpe would have him forget—a reputation as the best and quickest man of his weight in school. Then came later days in the big city, and, queerly enough, he thought of an occasion when Thorpe's quick wit and quicker arm had saved the day, or the night rather; but that was long ago.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Thorpe, with a faint smile to indicate a cheerfulness he did not feel.

"Thorpe," replied Harper sharply, "if you leave New York you are a fool."

"I believe such is the opinion of all New Yorkers," observed Thorpe dryly. "They really are the most provincial people in the world."

"I think you very foolish to give up your practice here," insisted his friend.

"Practice fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Thorpe irritably. "You know I can't live on my practice—a beggarly three thousand a year—hardly enough for cigars."

"But you *can* live on it." insisted Harper. "Of course not at the pace you have been going, but with a little economy——"

"Yes, by giving up my apartments and my clubs, and by living in a hall bedroom and eating quick lunches, and by taking my outings in Central Park, I can live on it,—but I won't. Anything rather than that—even Wyoming."

"And you are going to start to-night?"

"Yes, to-night at seven forty-five, to be explicit. All arrangements are made; transportation and berth bought, trunks packed; and I have given up my apartment, sold my library and office furniture, and my resignations to the clubs are in the mail."

"Don't be a fool, John," plead Harper, "there is yet time to change your mind. Your income from your law practice need not be limited to three thousand dollars, for with greater application you will yet make a success of it."

"There you go harping on the infernal law busi-

ness again. If that old uncle of mine hadn't insisted that I become a lawyer, I would be better off. I am not adapted for the law—I haven't the temperament. A lawyer should be a plodder, a student, that is if he is respectable; or he can go in for ambulance chasing if he doesn't care what people say about him—there's only two kinds, you know. Now I could never bring myself to chasing ambulances, and I must admit I am no plodder—in fact the very devil of unrest is in my bones. I can never pick up a paper and read of wars, or riots, or mining excitements, or anything like that without wishing I was there. I should have gone in for the army, or the navy, or the merchant marine, or some vocation that admitted of a little travel and adventure."

"Why don't you try for guard on the L road?" asked Harper cynically.

"It's born in me," sighed Thorpe. "Somewhere back in the misty past there must have been a Viking, or a pirate bold."

"The Vikings are running dairy farms out in Minnesota now, and the pirates bold are cruising in Wall Street," put in Harper; "but that is neither here nor there. The question is: what are you going to do out in Wyoming?"

"Well, I," and Thorpe reddened a little, "I thought I'd go in for cattle-raising."

Harper looked up in astonishment. "Well, Thorpe, you *are* a fool. Of all the maudlin, melo-

dramatic ideas! What has influenced you, dime novels or the Wild-West show down at Coney?"

"My mind is quite made up," returned Thorpe quietly.

Harper railed, pleaded, and argued in turn, but through it all Thorpe remained firm.

"Now, Harper," he said, by way of defense, "I don't want to bore you, but I will recapitulate a few facts, the majority of which you are no doubt familiar with. When my uncle died he left me, as you know, four hundred thousand in New York Northern shares, and in his will he expressed the wish that I would never dispose of them. The dividends were three per cent, and, in some years, four; which gave me from twelve to sixteen thousand to scrape along with. Of course I spent this just as fast as I got it, and I could have spent ten times as much with less effort, training as I have with a crowd of fellows whose income so exceeded mine. Ever since I left college, eight years ago, I have had the devil's own time trying to keep up with the crowd. I have constantly been in debt; I have robbed Peter to pay Paul; I have borrowed here to pay there; I have skimped along until I am sick of it all. I have been dissatisfied with myself for a long time; I've been moving in such a narrow, contracted circle that I could almost see my own back—the same grind every day, and the same monotonous pleasures every night. Really I had

begun to fear that I was becoming like one of those in there," and he pointed to a chinless youth seated by the window vacantly sucking the gold head of his cane. "It was a rut that I would have never gotten out of except by some act of Providence."

"And now come the bondholders," observed Harper, dryly, "moving in their mysterious way, their wonders to perform."

"Well, yes," laughed Thorpe, "but I doubt if the other stockholders would agree to your way of expressing it."

Harper hummed softly to himself for a few moments, and toyed with his watch-fob, a way he had when thinking.

"Thorpe," he said at last, "you come down to my office—we'll form a partnership."

The young man shook his head. "I'm through with the Law for good and all," he said. "I am almost tempted to say that I regard my law experience as so many years wasted. It never really interested me—except, perhaps, the two years that I was an assistant district attorney, and even then it was the dramatic phase that interested me rather than the legal. No, I'm through with the Law, and I'm through with New York: if I couldn't get along on seventeen thousand a year, I could hardly be expected to flourish on three. I've played the game here, and it has been without profit—now I am going to try something else. Why, damn it, man,

I'm getting old! I was thirty last week, and I'm not particularly proud of it either."

"And now you in your dotage are starting out to live among the cowboys and Indians and raise cattle," said Harper sarcastically. "What do you know about cattle?" he demanded. "I doubt if you know the difference between a Jersey and a Poland-China."

"I'll soon learn," declared Thorpe stoutly.

"Have you looked into the matter at all?"

"Very little," confessed the young man, somewhat embarrassed. "You see I only made up my mind to go, last night. But I have noticed those so-called 'cattle-barons' around the hotels, and they seem to have no end of money, and they don't seem to be the smartest people in the world either."

"Yes, mere untutored children of the plains," observed Harper. "What else have you found out?"

"Only that the state is about twice as big as all of New England, and has a population of about twenty thousand—about that of Yonkers."

"Exhaustive!"

Thorpe flushed.

"Where is Wyoming—is it West of Chicago?" inquired Harper.

"What ignorance!" exclaimed Thorpe, and he looked at his friend as pityingly as if his own knowledge had not been gleamed from a railroad folder

but few hours before. "Wyoming," he said impressively, "is even west of Nebraska."

"I knew it was out there somewhere," Harper hastened to explain; "but I had forgotten just exactly where. Fact is, I have never been west but once."

"When was that?" inquired Thorpe.

"When I went out to Cincinnati."

At this neither man smiled. It was no unusual statement—for a New Yorker.

"What will be your post-office address?"

"I don't know yet. I will go to Cheyenne first, that's the capital, and look around a bit. I will determine later where I shall locate permanently."

"Dinner is served, Mr. Thorpe," announced a servant.

Harper looked at his companion inquiringly.

"Yes, I ordered dinner," said Thorpe. "It's the last one I will have the pleasure of eating with you for some time to come," he added with a sigh.

The dinner was a good one, but it was eaten in comparative silence for each was beginning to feel the depression which comes to old chums on the eve of separation—perhaps forever. Thorpe could not but feel with heavy heart all that he was giving up. Every environment of his life was to be changed, and, as he glanced at the immaculate napery and shining silver, he shuddered, for he

vaguely realized that greasy oilcloth and rusty iron were to take their place.

The dinner dragged its interminable length through *entrée* and salad, and it was with a sigh of relief that he heard a page announce: "Your cab is at the door, sir."

"I'll go to the station with you, John," said Harper arising from his chair.

They stopped at the desk for a moment, where Thorpe paid his bill and bought a handful of cigars.

In the cab neither man spoke. As the conveyance wormed its tortuous way through the dense traffic of Broadway, Thorpe leaned forward in his seat and gazed wistfully at the life he was leaving. The sidewalks were thronged with fashionably dressed folk; through the windows of the well-lighted cafés he could see the happy crowds of diners within; the theater signs, now ablaze with light, called the attention of the passerby to their many and varied attractions; even the very newsboys seemed to be imbued with the spirit of the pleasure seeking crowd, and Thorpe gloomily realized that New York had never before seemed so attractive.

They were soon at the station. All the way from the club Harper had been thinking hard, but no argument which might changed Thorpe's sudden determination presented itself. At the train-shed gate they shook hands.

"You had better stay, John," said Harper, clearing his throat.

Thorpe shook his head resolutely. "No. I'm going. Goodbye!" and wrenching his hand from the grasp of his friend, he passed through the gate, boarded the train, and, like thousands of others before him, uncertain of the future, ignorant of destination, had started for the boundless West.

CHAPTER II.

THE WS RANCH.

THE day was warm for early March, and Algernon Alfred Hall, standing upon the sheltered east porch of the WS ranch-house, breathed deeply of the invigorating morning air as he curiously surveyed the panorama spread out before him. In the foreground were the bunk-houses, stables, and corrals; and beyond a line of cottonwoods marked the course of Crazy Woman creek as it rushed madly on its way to unite with the Yellowstone. To the west towered the Big Horn range, its snow-covered peaks standing out dazzling white against the deep blue of the sky. Lower down, on the slopes, the white was blended and shaded off into delicate tints of pink, rose and purple; and lower still great dark splotches, like cloud shadows, told of forests of pine. To the east, and the north, and the south, were the brown, desolate, Wyoming hills, stretching out monotonously in diminishing perspective to the distant horizon.

And this was the cow country—the greatest in the world. There were other cattle-raising countries, to be sure; but none equaled these immense ranges

which lay between Tongue river and the south fork of the Platte. This vast pasturage, unlike the pampas of South America, had the insatiable demand of great packing centers almost at its very door; unrestricted by the rigid quarantine of the Texas country, its herds could be marketed or moved about as circumstances might warrant; unrestrained by the wire fence of the settler—which so hatched and cross hatched Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas—the grazing thousands roamed over the hills and valleys as free and untrammeled as their wild cousins, the buffalo, had a decade before. Wyoming had at last come into her own. It was the heyday of the ranchman—a day when fortunes were to be made, or lost, with the luck of the seasons.

A noted ranch was the WS—famous throughout Wyoming. Over a hundred cowpunchers rode on the roundup of its seventy odd thousand cattle; and there was enough of its horses in the corrals and on the range to equip a regiment of cavalry. Its grazing herds dotted a principality; and its owner from the time he founded this barony of the hills to the day of his death, ruled it as imperiously as did any feudal baron in the days of old. No weakling was this man who, in the short space of less than a score of years, had by his indomitable will and untiring industry won this domain from the dreary hills at the foot of the Big Horns. A stern, harsh,

money-getting man was old Bill Sawyer; shrewd and calculating, yet at times bold and reckless almost to foolhardiness, he amassed a fortune which at his death was accounted the greatest in all that country. Few men liked Bill Sawyer, which is the lot of most rich men, but a reluctant admiration and a certain degree of respect he exacted of them all. Born with a reckless courage that knew no fear, he lived a tempestuous life, quarreling, beating down those who opposed him,—and always emerging from the conflict the victor. Even after the decline of years had caused the old man to turn over the active management of the ranch to his foreman, big Hank Kennedy, it was no unusual thing for him to engage in violent quarrels with the men, and they were careful to keep out of the way of his heavy cane, for he would use it upon the slightest provocation. On one occasion Sawyer knocked a pistol from the hand of an enraged cowboy, and then beat him into insensibility; only the timely interference of Kennedy saved the man's life, and from that moment the old man seemed to acknowledge the existence of a master spirit, and Hank Kennedy's will became law in the valley of the Crazy Woman.

The work of the ranch was to Hall as strange as it was interesting, for he had only arrived the evening before, and the weariness which comes with almost thirty-six hours of stage-riding had

caused him to retire early. He watched Sheep-shearer Jim rope a horse in the corral and ride him bucking and squealing away; he watched the Chinese cook prepare dinner for forty hungry punchers; and so interested was he in watching Dutch Cooper saddle his pet man-eating broncho, that he did not notice the big foreman until he heard his cheerful, "Good mawnin'."

Hall nodded. "I say, Mr. Kennedy," he said, "I should like to have a talk with you as soon as possible."

"Sure," agreed Kennedy. "Come on in the house," and he led the way into the large room which sufficed for a living room and an office combined.

Hall followed and seated himself with his back to the window, at the same time shoving the remaining chair around so that the light would be on the other's face as he talked.

Kennedy threw his gaunt frame into the chair, put his high-heeled boots on the top of the stove, and then leaning backwards, balanced himself upon the two hind legs of the chair with a dexterity only to be attained after years of practice.

Hall with his slight figure, fishy eyes, and anemic cheeks was in striking contrast to the man before him, for the ranch-boss was a powerful man, tall, rawboned, and broad-shouldered. His face, tanned the color of old leather, was lined and

seamed by years of exposure to beating sun and driving sleet; he had the born fighter's acquiline nose, and there was something about the square jaws, and the light blue eyes, that shone from their caverns under the ominous black eyebrows, that made men hesitate and slow to oppose him.

From the bosom of his shirt Kennedy produced two cigars, and offering one to the younger man, he lighted the other one with great apparent relish.

"No, I thank you—I don't smoke," protested Hall, with a shake of his head. "It's a bad habit, almost as bad as drinking or swearing, but there, I don't want to preach," he added, as he noticed Kennedy's look of surprise. "I only want to ask you a few questions regarding the estate."

"Shoot ahead, Hall," said Kennedy, puffing a huge volume of smoke and contemplatively watching it soar towards the ceiling, "fire ahead, my boy."

The younger man looked up quickly. For a moment he regarded the foreman, complacently reared back in his chair, with a keen, searching, scrutiny.

"Now in the first place, *Mr.* Kennedy," he began, in a low even voice, "people that I employ are not in the habit of calling me by my last name—or my first one either."

Kennedy looked mystified for a moment, and then

the light of a sudden intelligence overspread his broad features.

"Well I'm dogged if I know your fust name," he admitted, "when you writ you was a-comin' you signed your letter A. Alfred."

"My first name is Algernon," said Hall coldly.

"Well then I don't blame you none fer not givin' it away," remarked Kennedy innocently. "And between me and you, Hall, I'd git a new brand while I was up here—the boys might plague you, they's such onery houn's."

Had Kennedy but here turned in his chair he would have seen the scowl of resentment upon the pale face, and his relations with old Bill Sawyer's nephew would have probably been brought to a sudden termination; but all unconscious the big foreman sprawled his huge bulk to a more comfortable attitude and good-humoredly awaited the questioning. There was a period of silence and Hall glowered at the man whose well-meant counsel had so angered him. He saw the tremendous breadth of shoulders, and through the shirt, open at the throat, he saw the gorilla-like chest, broad and hairy, and then he restrained himself.

"I know but little of my uncle's affairs," began Hall, controlling his voice with an effort, "and having only arrived here yesterday, I haven't had the opportunity to become informed. I left New York upon the receipt of Mr. Forbes's letter

notifying me of Uncle William's death. Now I should like to know, first: did my uncle leave a will?"

"Not so far as I know," replied Kennedy; "we have looked high and low and haven't found any."

A look of intense satisfaction stole over the nephew's face.

"We? Who are 'we'?" he asked.

"Me and Bill Forbes—Bill was the old man's lawyer."

"Have you an inventory of the estate?"

"A which?"

"A list of the property my uncle owned at the time of his death."

Kennedy shook his head. "The old man didn't leave none such," he said.

"Is it possible he left no accounts?" he inquired; "no books of any kind? I can't comprehend such business methods. I should think he would have had endless disputes and trouble."

A grim, reminiscent smile stole over the foreman's rugged countenance.

"Disputes? trouble?" he repeated. "I reckon you didn't know the old man very well. He never had nothin' else—he was the disputenest man I ever see. But he never lost an argument that I ever remember of."

"I understand that he was a word and a blow kind of a person," commented Hall.

"A which?"

"A tempestuous character—a man with an ungovernable temper."

"He sure had a temper all right," agreed Kennedy. "I remember when he driv his only child out of the house. That was ten year ago; and the old man never had no peace of mind afterwards."

"The girl died in Hong Kong."

Kennedy nodded. "In China somewhere—she was a missionary."

"A missionary—perhaps." There was a shade of sneering incredulity in Hall's tone, but when he looked up into the stern, angular features of the ranch-boss, the insinuating smile slowly faded from his face and he coughed and shifted uneasily in his seat.

"She was a pore little gal, and her kin-folks back East orter to have taken her," declared Kennedy, his temper beginning to rise.

Hall returned hastily to his investigations.

"Did you tell Mr. Forbes to notify me or my cousin, Miss Sawyer, of our uncle's death?"

"No. I reckoned he would do it anyway. You see," he reiterated, "Bill was the old man's lawyer."

"My uncle has been dead nearly a month; were you going to continue to operate the ranch if no heirs appeared?"

"Sure," replied the foreman carelessly. Why not?"

Hall's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Have you sold any stock since my uncle's death?"

"Yes, had to do it to pay off the men. I sold a few hosses and a bunch of yearlin' steers."

"You did! How did you pass title?"

"Title, hell! I just handed 'em over—that's title enough in this country."

The Easterner at this stared in unfeigned amazement.

"I should like to see your accounts for the past month," he gasped.

"Sure," acquiesced Kennedy and he lazily fumbled in his pockets.

The search was fruitless although Kennedy, with muttered imprecations at his own carelessness, explored the yawning openings of his well-worn garments several times.

"I reckon I've lost it," he said at last." I had it right here in this coat pocket."

"Lost what?"

"Why, my accounts. I had 'em all put down in black and white on the back of an envelope."

"Goodness! Haven't you kept any books?" inquired Hall irritatedly.

"No. What'd I want with books? If I had

books I'd have to have a book-keeper, and he'd know more about my business than I would."

"Extraordinary, to say the least," commented Hall. "Must I have to take your word for everything?"

The insinuation was more than the big foreman could stand. He had made a sincere, and what those that knew him would have considered an extremely flattering, effort to be courteous to Hall, for Hall was not only the nephew of old Bill Sawyer—whom Kennedy reverenced—but he was also the heir who would succeed to the management of the vast WS interests. But now to impugn the honesty of his stewardship by even the faintest suggestion, was a matter that Kennedy would not permit to go unchallenged.

"Will you have to take my word for it?" queried Kennedy. "You sure must. And say," and the big foreman's boots came slowly down from their perch on the stove and he sat bolt upright in his chair, his cold, blue eyes boring through Hall's shifting ones," you are not a doubtin' what I tell you, are you? I don't recollect the name of any gent right now, that ever called me a liar and got away with it."

"No, no," hastily protested Hall, "you do not understand. The law, Mr. Kennedy, is very exacting in regard to these estate matters—everything must be accounted for—it must all be a matter

of record. Representing my own and my cousin's interests, it becomes necessary for me to ask you these questions and——"

"Are you a lawyer?" interrupted Kennedy.

"Yes."

"Well I'll be damned!" ejaculated the foreman, and he looked at Hall for the first time with any show of real interest, for Kennedy's private, or public for that matter, opinion of lawyers was not flattering to that profession and he had often expressed the belief that "they all orter be shot or pizened, same as prairie dogs."

"Now see here, Hall," said Kennedy after a few moments of deliberation, "we might as well git together. I'll show you why I'm on the square, if you've got any doubts. It's this-a-way: I'm workin' here on shares. I had a ten year contract with the old man to run this here outfit fer ten per cent. of the profits; and that contract has got four more years to run. Now you can see it don't stand me in hand to be anything else but on the square."

"Was the contract a written one?" inquired Hall.

"Naw," derisively returned Kennedy. "You didn't have to have no writings with the old man—when he said he'd do a thing, he done it."

An ill-concealed look of gratification came over Hall's face for a moment, and as the foreman rambled on he gloated secretly.

"Now last year," Kennedy continued, "we cleaned up over a hundred thousand, and in the next four years we're goin' to beat that—or I'll herd sheep. Now Hall, you and me have got to git down and work this here ranch fer all there is in it—we got to work together. Sabe?"

"But, Mr. Kennedy," said Hall, with a bland smile," as a matter of law, this contract, of which you speak, became abrogated at my uncle's death."

"Became which?"

"Became null and void—it ceased to exist."

"Well," returned Kennedy coolly, "as a matter of law it might cease to exist; but as a matter of fact it *don't*. I'm goin' to finish out them four years the same as if nothing happened."

There was a long minute of silence. Obviously now was the time for the heir to discharge the foreman; but as he gazed into the rugged countenance of the older man and saw the look of cool assurance, he hesitated, and then finally he put off that unpleasant duty until some other time.

"Tell me just how the estate stands," requested Hall returning to his investigation.

"Well, she don't owe a dollar. There's about sixty thousand dollars to her credit in the bank; there's forty odd thousand in nine to twelve per cent mortgages in the safe there," and he pointed to a ridiculously small safe in the corner of the room; "there's this here home-ranch of a hundred

and sixty acres, and nine or ten other quarter-sections which we have had some of the boys file on, and which we will git title to next year; then there's seventy-three or four thousand cattle; and besides a lot of range hosses."

"Be more definite. Don't you know exactly how many cattle we have?"

"No. There ain't no way of tellin' 'fore the spring roundup. Might have four or five hundred less to-morrow if we have a blizzard, or if the rustlers git busy."

"'Rustler?' What is a rustler?" inquired Hall, to whom the term had only a vague significance—something synonymous with "hustler," a canvasser, or perhaps an insurance agent.

To Kennedy such ignorance was appalling—he could hardly believe his ears and he scrutinized the Easterner suspiciously.

"You are not foolin'?"

"No."

"Well, then, a rustler is a cattle thief, or a hoss thief."

"It is a felony—a penitentiary offense, I presume."

Kennedy laughed cynically. "Well yes," he said, "but very few of 'em live long enough after gittin' caught to git there—they just pine away."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that rustlers are killed on sight. It's a

dangerous business now, though I've knowed many a feller to git his start rustlin'. Some of 'em has got good jobs now down to Cheyenne, and some of 'em have even gone to Washington, where I guess they are doin' a little rustlin' of a different kind. There is people," continued Kennedy with a grim smile, "so mean as to say that your dear old uncle got his'n that-a-way."

"Absurd!" exclaimed Hall. "Preposterous!"

"Well, a feller what used to ride fer the old man told me onct that his original herd was just an even hundred Texas long-horns. He sez they leaves the Panhandle with this here hundred, and when they gits to Dodge the old man sells a hundred and fifty, and when they gits to Sidney they sells a nuther hundred, and when they finally reaches here they only has about two hundred left."

"I don't believe it," declared the nephew.

"Well I do," returned Kennedy quietly, "fer I knowed that feller a good many years, and I never knowed him to tell a lie. He tells me the old man was sure an artist with a runnin'-iron."

"Running-iron?"

"A runnin'-iron," explained Kennedy, "to a rustler, is what a fountain pen is to your back-east forger. It's an iron used to alter brands with. For some years it has been ag'in the law to carry 'em, but an old hand can do 'bout as well with a piece of hay wire. Why, shucks, man, among the

old-timers our brand is nicknamed the 'Fryin'-pan brand!"'

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that they say that the brands your uncle didn't alter with a runnin'-iron, he blotched out with the red-hot bottom of a fryin'-pan."

"Do *you* say that my uncle was guilty of stealing?" demanded Hall.

"Well I never see him use no runnin'-iron," admitted Kennedy, "but many and many is the maverick he's branded—which amounts to 'bout the same thing. You see, he explained," it's purty hard to be honest when a maverick goes a rompin' by like a stray twenty dollar gold-piece."

"A maverick?" repeated Hall irritatedly, "what is a maverick?"

"Good Lord, man, where you been raised?" ejaculated the astonished foreman.

"In New York," replied Hall," where there are millions who have never heard the word."

"Well a maverick," began Kennedy resignedly, "is a calf which has been weaned but not branded. An unweaned calf can be identified by its follerin' its mammy, who is branded. Every spring the cattlemen git out on the range and round up all the she stuff, and brand their calves. It's ag'in the law to brand a maverick, but no one pays any 'tention to that—the fust man that can git his rope on a maverick claims him, though it's purty certain that

a maverick belongs to the bunch of cattle he's with."

"I understand," said Hall, becoming interested. "But tell me more about the rustlers. How do they operate?"

"The rustlers are, as I say, stock thieves," said Kennedy. They steal cattle mostly, but they will steal hosses when there is any market for them—and hosses, by the way, is a whole lot easier to rustle than cattle, fer you can git plumb out of the country with 'em in a single night. The rustlers usually drive off a bunch of cattle to some safe place two or three hundred miles away, then they alter the brand, and then after it gits healed up they ship them to market; or if there is some big railroad or minin' camp near, they drive them close by and slaughter them in the hills, and sell the beef."

"Have we lost many cattle on account of the rustlers?"

Kennedy grinned. "Confidentially." he said, "we are breakin' more than even on the proposition."

"How is that?" inquired Hall eagerly.

"It's this-a-way: We got the regular, old-time rustlin' stopped—that is the drivin' off of branded cattle—fer we got live stock inspectors in every market, and stock detectives at most every shippin' point; and we have had laws passed by which the

inspectors can grab any cattle they think has been stolen and turn them over to the Live Stock Commission to await proof of ownership. So about the only way we lose a branded steer now'days is when he's killed fer beef; but then," he continued, with a shrewd smile, "we feed more men than any other outfit, so they can't beat us none there. Now you see the maverick proposition is about the only one left to work on, and you bet we have been puttin' in some good licks on that."

"How?"

"Every year the State Board of Live Stock Commissioners nominate a time fer the spring roundup. The Board sets a time after the cattle has shed their winter coats enough so as to read the brands, and a time after the grass is up enough fer the hosses. At this time all the different outfits are supposed to work together, and the whole idee of the roundup is to count the stock and to brand the calves. Now here's the point: we don't wait fer the roundup—we have had our punchers out on the range all the time and they have been brandin' every unidentified critter in sight. We give our boys five dollars apiece fer every animal they could put their iron on—and say, they ain't overlookin' many neither."

"That's only business," commented Hall, rubbing his hands with satisfaction, "only business. If we did not claim these cattle, other people might."

"Exactly."

"Then we have nothing to fear from either rustlers, or other cattle concerns."

"You are right there," agreed Kennedy; "but there is another feller who has just come among us, and he is goin' to put us out of business—it's only a matter of time."

"Who is that?"

"The settler—the man with the wire fence."

"I don't understand."

"If a range loses its water it ain't fit fer cattle raising, is it? Well that's the proposition in a nutshell. You see this country is different from the one you come from—out here water is scarce. Streams are forty and fifty, and sometimes nearly a hundred, miles apart. Now these settlers, or grangers, or homesteaders, or nesters, or whatever you want to call 'em, are beginnin' to drift in here and fence up the water. And ag'in their fences kill a lot a cattle when there is a blizzard—they pile up on the fences and die by the hundreds. There's only a few of these fellers showed up yet, but it is only a matter of time until they crowd us out."

"Who are these settlers? where do they come from?" inquired Hall, his face darkening at the thought of his interests menaced.

"They are a lot of shiftless good-fer-nothin's that come in here, mostly from Kansas or Nebraska,

and homestead a quarter-section intendin' to raise stock in a small way, or to raise hay and sell it to us cattlemen. The fust thing they does, is to fence in their hay flat, which of course is always in a crick bottom, and most always they puts their fence around the best water-hole on the range. Then comes a long, dry, summer and we got to send the boys out to tear down the fence to keep the cattle from dying of thirst. Often they runs their fence right across the valley, and sometimes, like down on Powder river in the Hole-in-the-Wall country, the fences and the clifts together cut off all the water from the whole range. Now we got seventy odd thousand cattle and we own a hundred and sixty acres of land to pasture 'em on, we figure on from thirty to forty acres of pasturage to the critter, so if we lose the open range you can see where we will land."

"Its serious," agreed Hall, "very serious."

"It sure is. I tell you they are goin' to git us in time fer I've seen 'em do it before; they've chased the cattleman from Kansas to Nebraska, and then to Dakota, and finally out here. This is our last stand—we are backed clean up to the mountains. The ranges west of here don't amount to much, and anyhow we couldn't stand the higher freights to the eastern markets. If we can hold them back for four or five years more we will be doin' a big thing, for they ain't any more cheap land in the east

and these fellers just nacherly got to come out here—they ain't got no other place to go. And then ag'in," he continued, "there's things to raise we didn't know nothin' about a few years ago—alfalfa, sugar beets and such. Yes, sir, they are bound to git us—in time."

"I can readily see the state of affairs; but what is to be done?"

"Only one thing," replied Kennedy grimly; "do 'em like we had to do the sheep-men."

"How did you do the sheep-men?"

"We run 'em off. We had to kill a few of 'em, they was that bull-headed, but finally they learns that if they gits in the cow country they would sure git what was a-comin' to 'em, and then we don't have no more trouble. The boys used to begin by stampeding herds of horses through the sheep, then they'd shoot what was left, and if that wasn't hint enough fer Mr. Sheepman, why then they'd shoot him. It was the only thing to do, fer you know sheep spoils a range fer cattle; they eat it off, and stomp it down, and anyhow cattle won't graze where sheep have been."

"Have you tried to—er—discourage any settlers by any such means as were found necessary in the case of the sheep-men?"

For a time Kennedy did not reply, but gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling as though undecided as to how he should answer the question.

"Hall," he said, at last, "I have lived in the West all my life—all over it, from Chihuahua to British Columbia—and it has been a hard game—just one, long, never-ending fight. To live at all, you must either fight fer what you have got; or you must fight fer what the other feller has. I've done both, because I've had to; but now it's a case of fightin' fer what we have—I mean fer the open range. I am gittin' to be an old man, Hall, and I figure on quittin' this God-forsaken country when my contract runs out. I am a-goin' back to Missouri where I come from when I was a boy. I want to buy a farm and end my days there—and I'll have enough money to do it too, with ordinary luck. But I ain't a-goin' to be beat out on the last few plays of the game," and the big foreman hit the arm of his chair a resounding blow with his clinched fist, "and those who git in my way—well they'd better look out." He looked cautiously around and then leaning forward in his chair, whispered: "Yes, we have discouraged three of 'em, and there's goin' to be a lot more."

"Yes, yes, quite so," agreed Hall nervously. "But back east we operate differently, you know. We get hold of the legislatures, the courts, the executive officers, and all that sort of thing, and we accomplish a great deal without—er—disagreeable and unnecessary violence. Should we be able to do the same thing out here, don't you think we might

accomplish the same ends without the violence that you suggest?"

Kennedy snorted contemptuously. "Why, we've got all of that, but it don't seem to do us no good. Don't you know the cattle interests own the whole state? In most western states it's the railroads that runs things, but in Wyomin' it's the cowman. We own body, soul and britches, the legislature, the state officers, and the folks in Washington. We have had all the laws passed we could think of, but these here settlers don't seem to notice 'em. We have grabbed and sold as stolen, their stock in eastern markets; and we have deviled 'em one way or another fer years, but still they stick. The truth is, they ain't got no other place to go—they just got to be exterminated same as timber wolves, by a bounty fer scalps."

"But—er, who is to undertake this?" asked Hall.

Kennedy pondered over the question for a few minutes, and then after a long searching look at the Easterner, said: "There's goin' to be a meetin' of the committee to-morrow evenin', and I'll take you along, and you will find out all about it.. It ain't necessary for me to tell you to keep quiet about it," he added, "that is if you want to keep the top of your head where it is."

"Stop!" cried Hall, raising his hand impressively. "If you contemplate anything illegal, you must not tell me—I'll not be a party to it."

Kennedy calmly flicked the ashes off his cigar and looked at the younger man with an amused smile.

"You orter have been a actor," he remarked sarcastically. The smile slowly faded into a cynical sneer. "You won't be a party to it, eh?" he queried slowly. Then his jaws closed with a sudden snap. "The devil you won't!" he ejaculated. "Well, you will. We are goin' to work this ranch together, and we are goin' to share the responsibilities as well as the profits."

"But you are no longer interested in this ranch," put in Hall excitedly. "Your contract expired with——"

"Hall," thundered Kennedy, "if I was you I wouldn't mention that contract ag'in!"

The Easterner saw that the big foreman had arisen from his chair and was standing over him; he saw the ominous set of the square jaws, and he saw the eyes that blazed from under the beetling brows.

"But, Mr. Kennedy, you have——"

"Don't mister me," interrupted the irate foreman, "'misters' don't go out in this country. My name is just plain Kennedy, and there ain't no handle to it."

"But, my dear sir," expostulated Hall, "you were about to confide in me about some meeting. You have known me but a day—don't put yourself in

any man's confidence upon such short acquaintance. It's dangerous."

"Now look here, Hall," and Kennedy spoke deliberately as though carefully weighing each word, "you'll find that I ain't known around here as the fool you seem to think I am. I generally know what I'm doin'; and I'm a purty good judge of human nature, too. I knowed I wasn't runnin' no chance takin' you to this meetin', for I knowed your kind the minute I see you—I'll trust you, all right, even if it is on short acquaintance."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hall, and although his tone implied an affronted dignity, he tried in vain to meet the eyes that gazed into his so coldly.

"I mean," replied Kennedy, slowly, "that when I see a feller what don't drink, smoke, swear, nor chew, and with your kind of a long sharp nose, and with a little bit of a puny mouth, and with clost-set eyes like them of yourn, and with curly hair to boot,—why then I know that he's a cheap, measly, little tin-horn that 'd do anything for a four-bit piece, from stacking a deck to robbin' a grave, and there ain't no gittin' around it," and Kennedy banged his big fist down upon the table in a manner that left no room for argument.

Hall flushed under the indictment. In all his life he had never so been talked to before—he had met his master, and he knew it. He cowered help-

lessly in his chair, and the tense silence of the room was only broken by the noisy ticking of the clock upon the mantel.

"What meeting is it that you want me to go to?" he finally inquired.

"A meetin' of the committee on funeral arrangements," replied Kennedy, and picking up his sombrero the big foreman strode out of the room, leaving Hall to meditate upon the impetuous ways of the West.

CHAPTER III.

UNCLE BILLY.

It is a long journey from New York to Cheyenne —longer than Thorpe would have imagined, had his hasty departure have admitted of any thoughts upon the subject. Two days had now elapsed since he had bade Harper farewell, and yet he had but reached the edge of the plains country, that vast ocean of land formerly known as the "Great American Desert." For almost forty-eight hours he had sped through the prosperous farming country of the East and the Middle West, but now the land began to take on a different aspect. The neat villages and the clustering farmhouses which had so dotted the country behind him had vanished, and in their place there appeared the monotonous, rolling hills of the valley of the Platte—wearisome, dreary, and uninteresting. Yet had Thorpe but known, this land had a history that belied the tiresome sameness of its appearance, and he would have gazed through the car window with less of the bored indifference that clouded his countenance.

An ancient thoroughfare was the Platte valley. It was a roadway even before Romulus had founded

Rome, and before Rameses had conceived the building of the pyramids. Prehistoric tribes had used it and built mounds along its confines centuries before the Christian era; countless generations of Indians had traveled back and forth over it on their missions of peace and war; and then the white man came to know it. First came the solitary trapper on his way to the hunting grounds of the Northwest; then the organized expeditions of the great fur companies; after them came the great Mormon hegira, and two years later followed the fevered rush of the gold-hunters to California. The route was dangerous and beset with many hardships, but the stout-hearted pioneers were not lacking in courage, and so for a generation this slow and painful migration to the Far West continued,—and then came the railroad, and with it all mystery and adventure with which this historic trail was so inseparably associated, gave way to sordid and unromantic commerce.

The scenes of the Old West have indeed disappeared forever: the trapper, the stage-coach, the pony express, the herds of buffalo, the long wagon trains of the Forty-niners—all have faded away before the inexorable tide of years even as the ancient inhabitants of this valley had faded away before them; and the pioneers, unlike the vanished builders of mounds, left no time-defying monuments behind them, only a civilization which the

later generation thoughtlessly accepts as a matter of course. A half century has passed, and now where scalp-locks fluttered from tepee poles, church bells calls the peaceful villagers to their devotions. It was indeed the fighting-man who blazed the way, for where but few short years before the intrepid frontiersman tossed greasy flapjacks over his fire of buffalo chips, one hand the while upon his rifle ready to repel the attack of hostile savages, now the unctuous Hebrew drummer in the palatial dining-car smacks his flat jowls ostentatiously over canvas-back and champagne—and loudly complains to the very gods of the wretchedness of the service.

But Thorpe knew nothing of the history of the West, and the vistas which would have stirred the blood of a more knowing man, appeared to him cheerless, dismal, and forbidding. The last of the occasional eastern landscapes had been left behind hours before, and now as the train suddenly veered to the northward, it left the river bottom and he could see nothing but the illimitable prairie spread out to the horizon, a boundless waste with little to break its monotony save the occasional stunted trees and underbrush along some stream.

The car was almost empty, for it was the first month in spring and the annual pilgrimage of tourists to the warmer climes of California had passed some months before, and Thorpe, lonesome, restless, moody, and oppressed with a growing

doubt as to the wisdom of his hasty departure from the land that held all that was dear to him, in desperation arose from his seat and passed into the smoking compartment, where for a long time he smoked and gazed morosely out of the window.

There was one other passenger in the smoking room, for Uncle Billy Hanford was returning from a trip to Omaha, to which place he made periodic visits for the sole purpose, as he expresses it, to "make 'em turn over the box in the big game."

A kindly soul was Uncle Billy: honest and frankly truthful, loyalty itself to his friends, prodigally careless with money—when he had it; he was a character such as one meets but infrequently, even in the West. His profession, if it might be so termed, was that of faro-dealer, or rather it had been, for Uncle Billy's hands were palsied and players were superstitious—they said that he was unlucky and they refused to play where he dealt. He essayed the responsibilities of look-out, but his eyes had proven unequal to the task, and so it seemed that he would never again rise above the importance of case-keeper.

"Looks like purty pore land, don't it? They say out here, that the government will bet you a quarter-section against sixteen dollars that you can't live on it five years."

Thorpe for the first time turned and gazed at the speaker, for true to his eastern ideals he believed

that casual acquaintances were to be shunned. He saw an elderly man whose attire of black broadcloth might have proclaimed him a judge, or a country banker. The ends of a narrow black tie hung down loosely across an immaculate shirt bosom, and the skirts of a long frock-coat extended almost to the well polished boots. He had the clean, pinkish complexion of a man who had lived well, and the twinkling blue eyes and the curves that lurked about the corners of the mouth beneath the closely cropped, grizzled mustache, evidenced a keen appreciation of humor.

"Yes," agreed Thorpe, "it does seem to be poor land. I was just thinking what a strange place to live it is."

The old man drew from his pocket a number of cigars.

"I was in a little game last night," he said, "and as I wasn't drinking any, I accumulated quite a bunch of cigars. Have some," and he held out a handful.

Thorpe took one.

"This is an expensive kind," he remarked, as he recognized the label.

"Yes, they are a little expensive," admitted Uncle Billy, with a smile; "they cost me about three hundred apiece."

"Gracious!" ejaculated Thorpe. "It must have been a big game."

"One of the biggest in the country," returned the old man. Then lighting his cigar and buttoning all the buttons of his waistcoat save the lower one, he settled back in his seat with the air of a man perfectly at ease and on good terms with all the world.

"So you thing this a strange country to live in, eh?" and the old man chuckled softly. "Why the people that live out there," and he pointed a finger at a collection of sod houses out on the windswept prairie, "they think this is God's country. It's a curious thing," he added, "that wherever you go you find people living, and they all seem to think that they have found just *the* place."

"It is a remarkable thing," agreed Thorpe. "All day I have been wondering how this country became settled—it's so desolate, so lonesome."

"Gold did it."

"Gold?" exclaimed Thorpe. "How?"

"Well it was like this," began the old man: "In 'forty-nine there was a big rush to Californy, and this here Platte valley we been ridin' through all day was just one long percession of Argonauts, I believe they call 'em. They came from everywhere—Illinois, Indiana, New York, Canada, and even Europe. They was all a goin' out and pick up a few bushels of gold and return to the States about the next day and live in affluence ever after-

wards. I was a young feller in Iowa in them days, and I can see 'em comin' along the road as though it was yesterday—prairie schooners and oxen, hosses and wagons, some a hossback and some a foot, all a racin' to get there before the gold run out. I remember one outfit that had a organ in the wagon, and they was a singin' songs they was that joyous. You ain't never seen a gold rush, have you?" he asked.

Thorpe shook his head.

"Well, it's a wonderful thing to see—and if you ever do see a big one you will never cease to wonder at the power of gold to turn men's heads.

"But I started to tell you how this country got settled. Well there's a town 'bout fifty miles up the road that we pass through, and I'll tell you how it come; and that story 'bout tells the history of all this country.

"In the Spring of 'fifty-one there was a Indiana outfit pulls out of Omaha bound for Californy. They starts sooner than they orter, and consequently is delayed considerable by bad weather, so when they gets into the short grass country it gets to be purty hard sleddin'. It was about this time in a year and there wasn't 'nough grass for the hosses, game is scarce, and provisions runnin' low—it takes the sand out of 'em; but they keep on a-goin'. Every day or so they would come across some busted down outfit, or some outfit what had turned

around and was a-comin' back; but still these fellers kep' a pluggin' along. The hosses gets thinner and thinner, a couple of wagons breaks down and then the Injuns runs off some of their stock, and it looks like they can't get no fu'ther. About this time a outfit comes along on the way back and they ain't singin' no songs neither. Of course they stops and has a pow-wow, and this returnin' outfit tells them there ain't no gold to speak of in Californy cause they been there, and then these here Indiana fellers just give up. Their wagons is broke down and what stock they got left is too pore to go any fu'ther. They don't know what to do. The other fellers offers to haul them to the nearest crick-bottom where they can feed up the stock before startin' on, or back. They sure don't know what to do, but they has to make a quick decision, so they accepts the offer and makes camp in the likeliest place they can find.

"By and by they kind a gets used to the country —and then to like it. The land was free, and as they was busted that was a whole lot. Then ag'in they finds that they can sell what stuff they can raise to the crowd that was still streamin' past, for it never quit a comin' you know—and that was the way this town come about, and that was about the way all this country started to get settled. Of course," he concluded, "afterwards come the cattle-

raisers, and the homesteaders, and the farmers, until she gets settled up like she is to-day."

"It don't seem to be especially crowded yet," remarked Thorpe, looking out at the bare prairie. "But what you have told me has been very interesting, and I daresay that the citizens of the town you speak of, are quite as proud of it as though it had been founded with all the ceremony and fanflares of a royal proclamation."

"Sure," replied Uncle Billy; "but it is only natural to be proud of your own town. I call Buffalo my home town."

"It's a nice city," observed Thorpe.

"It sure is," agreed the old man.

"It has a splendid hotel——"

"There ain't no better, nowhere."

"Well lighted streets——"

"You bet."

"Beautiful homes and stately buildings——"

"Y-e-s," agreed the old man rather dubiously, "but nothing much to brag on yet, but she'll grow to it."

"And the late traffic alone is enough to maintain it the second city in New York."

"New York?" ejaculated the old man. "Why Buffalo ain't in New York. I reckon you ain't studied geography much lately. Buffalo is in Wyomin'—why, mister, it is the county seat of Johnson county."

"I'm sorry to say that I never heard of your town," admitted Thorpe, smiling at the other's astonishment.

The old man was about to launch into an eulogy of the achievements and future of the western town, when Thorpe asked, "What do you think of New York?"

"New York!" ejaculated Uncle Billy, "well that is a rattlesnake town for sure. Of all the dead-falls, honkeytonks, and tinhorns, that town does beat the country—it's worse than Hays, or Dodge, or Ogallala or Abilene ever was! Why, sir, the last time I was in New York I'll be dogged if they didn't try to skin me seven times in twenty-four hours. And hold-ups! If there's a man, woman, or child in that town that didn't get at least a two-bit piece from me—why they just wasn't around, that's all."

"Robbed you, did they?" laughed Thorpe.

"Well," admitted the old man, "I managed to quit a little better than even. Funny thing, too, how it happened: One day a feller in the hotel introduces hisself, and a mighty pleasant kind of a feller he was too, and he wants to know all about the cattle business—says he's thinkin' of investin' a large sum of money in a ranch. Well I tells him all I knows about the business and he seems mighty grateful, and he thanks me quite profuse. The next day he introduces me to a couple of friends

of his'n, mighty nice fellers they seem to be, and that evenin', to make a long story short, we all sets in a poker game in his room.

"Well, sir, the fust hand 'round, I see the cards is shaded, and shaded so strong too that you could read 'em the length of this car—the kind of a pack that one sheep-herder tries to skin another with, out in our country. I was ashamed of 'em! However I didn't say nothin', for a feller that can read 'em unbeknownst to a brace dealer, has got him beat to start on."

He stopped his narrative and watched the smoke curl from the end of his cigar.

"Well, how did you come out?" inquired Thorpe, intensely interested.

"I got all they had," said the old man simply.

"Good for you!" exclaimed Thorpe. "And I suppose you took the money out West and invested it safely out there?"

"Not exacely," confessed the old man. "You see I took a whirl at Wall Street."

"Were you a bull or a bear?"

"Neither. As clost as I can figure, I was a rabbit."

"You didn't win anything?"

The old man shook his head.

"When I plays corn open and coppers wheat, she comes out of the box, corn-wheat; when I puts my money on cotton it comes splits; and when I plays

oats it comes craps; and when I plays anything else it falls in the single O in the pea green. All of which," he concluded, "shows that a feller orter stick to his own game."

Thorpe laughed heartily.

"So that is why you don't like New York?"

"No," replied Uncle Billy, "I'm not such a hard loser as that. It's because New York is too noisy, too crowded, too unsociable, and too grasping. In the West there's room to spread out—a feller can get his lungs full of good, clean air, and he don't have to tread on nobody's toes a doin' it neither. Then ag'in the people's different; they are sociable—a man don't need no letter of introduction out in our country. They are generous too; they will he'p a feller. Why there ain't a cabin in the West that ain't open to the traveler. If you come along and you are hungry, step right in and he'p yourself—they ain't no locks you know. But you try that in New York and you'll get in jail in no time—you just got to have the ante in your hand *all* the time. And of all the riff-raff! You just got to keep one hand on your pocket-book and the other on your watch."

He stopped suddenly and eyed Thorpe suspiciously.

"What town are you from?" he demanded.

"New York," solemnly replied Thorpe.

Uncle Billy colored a vivid red.

"I want to beg your pardon," he stammered, "I ain't quite responsible for——"

"I'll forgive you," sternly interrupted Thorpe, "upon one condition."

"And that is what?"

"That you eat supper with me."

The old man breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'll take a shot at it if I lose," he said, and and with this vague remark he arose and followed Thorpe into the dining car.

The supper proved to be an excellent one, and one to which they both without question did ample justice.

"Say, where you bound for?" abruptly inquired Uncle Billy.

"I hardly know," confessed Thorpe. "I'm going to Cheyenne first, and then I'll look about for some good place to locate."

"Lungs?"

"No," laughed Thorpe, "cattle."

"Cattle? Why you ain't no cow-man!"

Thorpe blushed. "No, but I'm going to be," he declared.

This assertion was made boldly and confidently enough, but there was an indefinable something in Thorpe's manner that did not escape Uncle Billy, old poker player that he was.

"The boy's got a weak hand," he said to himself, and he pitied him, for he knew too well the usual

experience of the tenderfoot in the cattle business. To him is was an old, old story—the pitiful ignorance of the tenderfoot of even the most ordinary duties of ranch life; the loneliness and dejection of the almost solitary existence; and the discouragement of losses by blizzard, or drouth, or any of the many other causes. The old man knew that the successful cattleman is born and bred in the business, and that when he enters the lists he wagers a lifetime in the game.

Suddenly an idea came to the old man and he dropped his fork with a clatter. "Say!" he exclaimed, "if you are bound to take a whirl at the stock business, why don't you come to Buffalo?"

"Is it a good town?" inquired Thorpe.

"'Is it a good town!'" ejaculated Uncle Billy, "well I should say it is—she's a rip-snorter, if you ever see one. Why, mister it's the best cow town in the West! And what's more," he added, "I'll he'p you look around if you want to buy out a brand."

To a man alone and in a strange country, advice is a thing not to be lightly thrown aside; but the average New Yorker is not prone to accept counsel given him by the chance acquaintance of an afternoon, especially when a financial transaction is involved. Yet Thorpe had liked the old man from the first; his quaint logic, his picturesque speech, and

his simple and unaffected manner were in delightful contrast to the conventions of the East.

"May I ask your name?" he inquired.

"Well, if I didn't clean forget to introduce myself," said the old man, somewhat abashed. "My name is Hanford, William B. Hanford—though there ain't many that knows it, for they all call me 'Uncle Billy.'"

"My name is Thorpe, John Thorpe."

The two men shook hands gravely.

"You ain't no kin to them Western Reserve Thorpes, are you?" inquired the old man.

The young man shook his head impatiently.

"No," he said, "I am the only one of the family left. But who knows," he added, with a smile, "but what I might establish another dynasty of Thorpes in Wyoming."

Uncle Billy laughed and lifted his glass, "Here's luck," he said.

Quickly Thorpe reverted to the subject in which he was interested.

"Do you advise me to go to Buffalo?" he asked earnestly.

"I sure do," replied the old man, "that is if you are set on going in the cow business."

Thorpe craved advice—yes, hungered for it with all the eagerness of the tenderfoot. Yet he must be cautious, for he had heard much of the ways of the Westerners, and some of the stories were

hardly to their credit. He looked at the old man searchingly, but Uncle Billy gazed back at him with honest, blinking eyes.

"What is your business, Mr. Hanford?" he inquired, for he was curious to know if the old man was banker, lawyer, ranch-owner, or merchant. That he was one of these he had not the slightest doubt.

"Me? Why I deal bank,—faro. I'm a gambler."

Gambler! Thorpe's heart fell, and he flushed, for he knew that his face had betrayed his disappointment. Gambler! The very word a synonym of deceit, dishonesty,—disrepute. It seemed impossible that this courteous, pleasant-faced old gentleman should be of that ilk, and he looked up quickly expecting to hear the old man laughing and to hear his explanation that it was but a jest. But Uncle Billy was regarding him impassively, and if he had read the young man's thoughts there was no sign upon his immobile countenance.

While these thoughts were running through his head Thorpe was quite oblivious to the fact that the train was slowing up. Suddenly he noticed the arc lights of a city, and he heard the conductor cry out, "All out for Cheyenne and all points north."

Uncle Billy had arisen and was extending his hand. "I am glad to have met you," he said, "and

I'm sorry we got to quit company; but here's where I change cars for Buffalo."

Thorpe looked into the old man's kindly, smiling face, and a great revulsion of feeling surged over him.

The old man had gathered his luggage and had started towards the door.

"When does your train leave?" asked Thorpe, hurriedly crowding after him.

"Right away," replied the old man, cordially. "Why?"

"Because, Mr. Hanford, I'm going with you to Buffalo," and he grabbed the old man's hand in a hearty clasp.

"Shake!" exclaimed the old man delightedly, "But doggone it, from now on call me 'Uncle Billy.'"

CHAPTER IV.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO BUFFALO.

THERE was the long shrill wail of air suddenly released, a heavy grinding of brakes, and the train coming to a stop, Helen Sawyer awoke and looked out of the window where she was confronted with a very poorly executed picture of a glass of beer of monstrous size, painted upon the false front of the "No Limit Saloon."

To one accustomed to arising in conservative Boston, such an apparition is apt to be disconcerting, so the girl rubbed her eyes to make sure that she was not dreaming. Looking again she saw through the curtainless windows of the saloon, tables of various sizes covered with green cloth, and she might have noticed that they were all deserted, save one, where a belated poker game was in progress, in which the inevitable crowd of losers were playing, wolf-like, in a forlorn endeavor to get even, for the winners had departed upon their way rejoicing many, many hours before.

There was but one street in Casper, and flanking it on either side were long rows of frame shacks, all of the same unvarying, monotonous style of

architecture. Most of these unpainted, false fronted, ungainly structures were occupied by saloons, for Casper is at the end of the railroad and the slaking of the Wyoming thirst is an industry of no little importance. In front of the saloons the young woman noticed racks, to which were tied lean, wiry, wicked-looking cow-ponies, upon whose flanks were branded certain cabalistic signs denoting ownership—but this she did not understand.

"At last, the frontier!" she exclaimed.

A few minutes later she had dressed and was making inquiry of the station agent where she might breakfast. The station agent was a mighty dignitary in Casper, and he felt it. It was he who sold the tickets, handled the express matter, was custodian of the mails, and operated the mysterious telegraph key. All of this he did with a haughty nonchalance that was impressive to those in the humbler walks of life; yet not since that evil day when a plain, unobtrusive-looking stranger had suddenly appeared from nowhere and demanded a ticket to Bellows Falls Junction, Vermont, had he been so disconcerted. He managed though, after a vast amount of stuttering, to tell her that the only place where meals could be had, not in a saloon, was in Yo Sing's restaurant across the tracks; and so to this place she hurried, leaving the vendor of tickets standing upon the platform staring after her

and blankly scratching his chin. Women of her kind were unusual in Casper.

As the girl entered the restaurant, Mr. Cy Bristol was showing a crowd of blasé punchers the only true and orthodox manner of branding a calf, using, of course, and much to his annoyance, the proprietor for the purpose of demonstration. Instantly hats were doffed, an embarassed silence fell upon the crowd, and Yo Sing was released, for which he was duly grateful.

"Can you tell me when the stage leaves for Buffalo?" she asked, as she seated herself upon a high stool.

Yo Sing removed a flat-iron which was weighting down a slice of sizzling ham upon the top of the stove, and blinked several times in quick succession.

"Bluffalo? You go?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Stage? You ketch 'em?"

"Yes."

Yo Sing blinked again and for a few moments seemed lost in thought.

"Bluffalo? You go?" he inquired again.

"Yes."

"Stage? You ketch 'em?"

"Yes, yes," replied the girl, impatiently.

How long this would have continued is difficult to say had not Long Shorty interceded:

"Shut up, you yaller, slant-eyed, son of a Oriental hoss thief! You jest give that lady five dollars wuth of ham an' aigs—an' remember," he enjoined fiercely, "if ary one of them aigs ain't fitten fer a lady to eat, why I'll jest cut your years off." Then turning to the astonished girl, Long Shorty, with a profound sweep of his sombrero, said, "Lady, the stage will start whenever you are durned good an' ready—so take yer time." Then laying a five-dollar gold-piece on the counter to pay the bill, the gallant stage driver stumbled out of the restaurant, blushing to the ears.

Helen Sawyer was astounded. In Boston they never did such things. Here indeed was western chivalry with a vengeance. Then suddenly the humor of the situation appealed to her and with a faint smile she put the gold piece in her purse, much to the Chinaman's disgust, and ordered a cup of coffee. Meanwhile the audience had fled and had scattered up the street with the momentous tidings that "the finest lookin' woman in the whole world is eatin' breakfast down at the Chink's restaurant."

As Thorpe and Uncle Billy came out of the "Delmonico Eating House," they saw the stage draw up with a flourish before the post-office, and they, each with that complacency that comes with a good cigar after a hearty breakfast, sauntered lazily down the street after it and watched Long Shorty

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load on the mail and express matter. Two other passengers had preceded them; Jud Higgins, fat, florid, blond,—undoubtedly, an Englishman,—was returning to Buffalo from a stockholders' meeting of the Anglo-American Beef Syndicate, which he had attended in the capacity of manager of that company's Powder River property, the big "46 ranch"; and then there was Arapahoe Rowan, a tall, lean, hawk-faced man, who returned Uncle Billy's salutation with only a nod. To these gentlemen Thorpe was duly presented, but there was nothing fervid in their greetings. The bovine Mr. Higgins extended a flabby hand and mumbled a half audible acknowledgment; and the other man said nothing at all—yet there was something in the firm grasp of his hand that conveyed a cordiality greater than if he had spoken.

"Why do they call him 'Arapahoe' Rowan?" inquired Thorpe of his companion.

"Well," returned Uncle Billy, "the country is full of Rowans—there's 'Ear-muff' Rowan, up on Wind river, and there's old 'Sheep-dip' Rowan what lives in Sheridan and there's a lot of other Rowans but I reckon the main reason is on account of a little argument he had onct with the Arapahoes."

"Argument? Do you mean that he fought them?"

"He sure did—he just cleaned them out. Why,"

and the old man turned on Thorpe in some astonishment, "I thought everybody knowed about that fight!"

"Tell me about it," requested Thorpe, intensely interested now that the hero of the episode was to be a fellow passenger.

"Not now—it's too long a story. All I'll say is that that feller is a very devil in a fight, and the way he handles them Arapahoes gives him a reputation from one end of the county to the other. But climb on," he added irrelevantly; "we're all ready to start."

The two other passengers had already taken their seats inside, and Uncle Billy lost no time in arranging the mail bags, which had overflowed the boot, to his liking, and then he stood back waiting for Thorpe to step within. But the young man shook his head.

"No, I want to see the country—I'm going to ride with the driver."

There was a snap in the brisk morning air and the horses were pawing the ground and champing at their bits. The last sack of mail had been loaded and the passengers had taken their seats, and yet the stage waited. Long Shorty had disappeared into the Yo Sing restaurant, and it was in that direction that the young man turned his impatient gaze for he was anxious to be off. Suddenly the restaurant door opened, a crowd on the sidewalk

made way, and a young woman appeared followed by the stage driver who carried her bag.

"Gad!" ejaculated Thorpe, and then he decorously turned his eyes and gravely contemplated the sky line of the distant hills.

Long Shorty gallantly opened the stage door and waited. The girl stopped, opened her purse and extracting a gold-piece handed it to the astonished driver, saying, "I am afraid I couldn't eat five dollars' worth of ham and eggs—all I wanted was a cup of coffee—but I thank you very, very much."

Long Shorty endeavored to make some reply—got tangled up—thought better of it—mumbled something—and then frantically scrambling up to his seat he released the brake, cracked his whip, the horses sprang forward, and they were off on their thirty-six hour ride to Buffalo.

It was all the work of an instant but Thorpe, schooled by long metropolitan experience, had made a swift inventory.

"Good figure—pretty face—brown eyes—and well modulated voice. Gadzooks! I would fain be seated below beside the fair lady," he said to himself.

The road meandered in long curves around the hills, and through the clear atmosphere it could be seen for miles as it twined its dusty, sinuous length along the creek bottom and across the flat.

Looking backward the town now seemed as though built of toy houses, and the long dark line by it was a freight train standing on a siding. At intervals, piles of rusting cans showed where the freighter had camped, while scattered along the road empty whisky bottles marked the places where the cowpuncher had taken his last drink as he returned reluctantly to the enforced abstinence of the range. All was silence, and save for an occasional prairie dog village, a chickadee, or a long tailed magpie, the bare hills gave no signs of life.

Laboriously and lumbering heavily upon its leathern springs, the coach climbed the hills, and then when the summit was reached the brakes were set and the horses galloped madly down to the valley below.

"This air is like wine!" exclaimed Thorpe, inhaling a long breath. "It's fine!"

The stage driver spat deliberately over the wheel, and then turned and regarded his passenger critically.

"I reckon you must be from the East," he observed.

"I am."

"Thought so," rejoined the driver. "There was a feller with a hard-boiled hat like your'n that I took up last week. He was from New York, and a curious critter he was, too."

Thorpe smiled as he realized that the city man

is even more out of his element in the provinces than his rural cousin in the city.

"Yes, he sure was a curious critter," reiterated Long Shorty, meditatively. "Durned if I know what was the matter with the cuss."

"How is that?" inquired Thorpe, encouragingly.

"Well, it's like this," the driver began: "This here feller was a ridin' up in front with me, an' as they wasn't no other passengers, an', of course, plenty of room inside, I nacherly takes him fer a sociable galoot, though I gotta admit he didn't look it. Well I talks along, points out the things of interest an' so on, but he never says a word. You see lots of trips I ain't got no company an' I gits purty dern lonesome, an' so it's a kind of a relief to talk when I *do* git a chanct.

"Well, sir, this feller don't make no play at all —jus' acts like he's deaf an' dumb, an' finally I gits to believin' he *is*, so I asts him where he's from. What do you reckon he sez?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well you kin believe me or not, but I'll herd sheep if he didn't say, 'Please don't annoy me. I am sittin' here to *see*, not to talk.' Now wouldn't that beat you! I never hears sech talk an' it puzzles me considerable—it sure did. I thinks over it fer a spell an' then I asts him what he means. Well sir, I like to fell off the seat when he sed, 'I don't never

talk with no cab-drivers, stage-drivers, ner barbers.' That was a kinda curious thing to say, an' I laughs at first, an' then it kinda riles me. The more I thinks about it the madder I gits. But what kin I do? My leaders was as wild as coyotes an' I can't drop the reins, so I has to drive fer five long hours with that there simlin -headed, clabber-eyed, son-of-a-gun sittin' by me, an' I tell you when we gits to Antelope Springs, where we stops fer dinner, I was a-bilin'.

"Johnny Saunders was a-standin' near the corral gate as I drives up, an' I yells to him to ketch them leaders, which he does, an' then I jes' grabs that son-of-a-gun by the th'ote, lets out a yell, an' down we both goes over the front wheel an' under the hosses' feet. Soon as I feels him crumple up in my han's I changes my mind 'bout hurtin' him,—but I did give him a skeer. I has 'bout a foot of plug chawin' in my hip pocket, so I jes' holds one hand over the gent's eyes an' with the other I pulls out that there plug. 'Now,' I yells, 'I'm goin' to cut yer th'ote!' An' with that I draws that plug across his jugular, an' then you orter heard him yell. My Lord, what a yell! Derned if it didn't skeer me—made the goose bumps crawl up my back—so I lets him go in a hurry.

"Well, sir, that feller jes' crawls inside the stage an' I don't see him no more. I hears afterwards

that he's stoppin' at the WS ranch up near Buffalo."

Thorpe laughed heartily. "It served him right," he said. "Only you should have made him eat some of the plug."

"Hell, man, I didn't have no more than enough fer myself. Git up, Jude."

Shortly after noon the stage reached Antelope Springs and Thorpe learned without regret, that business compelled Mr. Arapahoe Rowan to stop over. And then, after the passengers had eaten their hasty meal and the stage had resumed its journey northward, Long Shorty was left alone upon the driver's seat to ruminate upon the lack of sociability of "eastern fellers", for his auditor of the morning had disappeared into the coach below.

At the start Helen Sawyer was not impressed with her fellow passengers. She was dimly conscious that they were three men; one a benign old gentleman whose silver white hair contrasted so strikingly with the healthy flush of his rosy cheeks that it compelled her second glance; one who had the fat, sleek, contented look of a coachman; and one who was tall, stern of countenance, and as silent as the hills through which they were passing; and with this she dismissed them all from her mind and her thoughts again reverted to the strange destiny that had brought her to the West.

But at Antelope Springs the taciturn Rowan

disappeared and a stranger took his seat, at the sight of whom the girl's eyes widened momentarily, for his garb and bearing unmistakably bespoke of the East. Men, who are always grudgingly faint-praised of their fellow creatures, would have admitted Thorpe "good looking"; but women—well they all have their own peculiar ideals. There was nothing of the cameo type in Thorpe's features; the finely chiseled profile, and the thin, expanded nostril were lacking; neither had he the thin lips so inseparably associated with the patrician. John Thorpe had the square face of the soldier, and there was an angularity of the jaws, too, that forever removed him from all that smacked of "masculine beauty"; his nose was large and well rounded, and a generous mouth when he smiled revealed an even row of white teeth, bordered by lips whose slight thickness might have suggested sensuality. But these details were not of the girl's observing; indeed as she averted her eyes she declared herself indifferent, yet there perversely lingered in her mind the image of a tall, dark, young man, with blue eyes and the figure of an Apollo.

Thorpe's eye roamed over the landscape but he saw it not, for he was mentally digesting a pretty mouth and a pair of soulful brown eyes. Again he stole a covert glance. "The refined face of a cultured woman," he remarked inwardly; "a good

figure and, thank heaven, small hands and feet. But what is she doing out here?" He revolved this question over in his mind for some time but without satisfaction. "In novels," he mused, "something invariably happens about this time. The heroine is more than satisfactory, the stage setting is superb, and now for the melodrama. What shall the plot be? An Indian attack? No; for the driver told me that there were no Indians in this part of the country. Bandits? Improbable, for the stage carries no treasure. An aquatic rescue—a plunge into raging waters? Clearly impossible, for according to Uncle Billy there is no water over knee deep within a hundred miles."

For miles the young man idly amused himself by imagining dramatic situations such as are described in books, and he smiled to himself as he concluded, after a summary of all his acomplishments, that if the heroine was not suddenly sued, attached, garnished or enjoined, he would have small chance of dashing heroically to her rescue. Then again he sadly realized that he had none of the ear-marks of the conventional hero, for all of those interesting people of stage and story are handsome, with piercing black eyes and curly hair, and of these indispensable features he had none; but he did know that he had been without a shave for four days and he inwardly cursed his negligence. Suddenly Thorpe awoke to the fact that Uncle Billy was conversing

with the young woman, and he sat up and listened with an undisguised admiration. For hours the old man's tongue ran on glibly, volubly, and like the babbling brook, everlastingly. The girl had little to say; her attitude was one of merely respectful attention with an occasional polite acquiescence when occasion demanded. In vain did he rack his brain for some conventional way of entering into the conversation; he exhibited the keenest interest in every thing Uncle Billy had to say; he gave him eloquent and pleading looks; but the old man only smiled and rambled on easily and fluently, roaming from one subject to another with the ingenuous volubility of a child.

"The old reprobate!" muttered Thorpe. "Who would have thought it"

"Yes," went on Uncle Billy, "I see where that turrible rich man back east give up a million to his fav-orite college. Now why don't he never scatter his bets none?" he complained. "He ain't never done nothin' for Wyomin.' We ain't got none of them fancy schools to endow them chairs in, but there's a world of poker games. If that rich feller would endow just one seat in Billy Fidler's stud game, just think what a power of good it would do."

The girl smiled but said nothing, and Thorpe gave the old man a look that would have melted a stone idol. Uncle Billy looked out of the side of

the coach and chuckled softly to himself. Suddenly he turned to the girl with, "Your name is—"

"Sawyer," she answered, blushing.

"Well, Miss Sawyer, shake hands with Mr. Thorpe. Dogged if I didn't clean forget to introduce you. You see out here a feller forgets his etiquette, and he never thinks of introductions. We drop them along with swaller-tail coats and plug hats and similar institutions of the effete East. I reckon this is the fust time I have introduced anybody in society for several seasons," and the old man's eyes sparkled humorously.

The young people looked at each other and laughed.

"Well really," said the girl, "I am glad you told me that, for I did think you a bit informal," and she extended a white, tapering hand to Thorpe in acknowledgment of the introduction.

Uncle Billy felt a pressure upon his knee and turning saw the silent entreaty in the ox-like face of Mr. Higgins, but he only smiled and shook his head.

"No—the game is full," he said.

CHAPTER V.

TOM HORN.

ONWARD through the night sped the stage coach creaking, rolling, and lurching in the embrace of its great leathern springs like some ancient galleon in heavy seas. It wound its devious way around some of the hills, climbed at snail space to the summit of others, and then rattled down the declivities to the agonized wail of protesting brakes. Outside the stars shone with the brilliancy peculiar to the high plains of the West; the hills loomed huge and dark through the gloom; and but for the noise of the coach itself and the occasional bark of a distant coyote there was the hush of the wilderness. In the coach the snores of Uncle Billy and Jud Higgins rumbled, reverberated, choked and snarled, playing the entire gamut of known and unknown sounds from staccato treble to fortissimo base.

Once during the night Thorpe awoke and for the moment he was bewildered. He could hear the unmistakable patter of horses' feet over the sandy road, but it was different from the familiar click, click, clickety, click of cab horses over cobble-

stone and asphaltum. He felt the soft, yielding pressure of a form beside him, and in the starlight he distinguished the features of a woman sleeping with the tranquil peace of a tired child. A head rested upon his shoulder and from the great mass of nut-brown hair there exhaled a delicate perfume as from some rare exotic. Then it all came back to him and he sighed a long, tremulous, ecstatic sigh and closed his eyes again, but not in slumber. Near dawn the woman awoke and finding her head upon the young man's shoulder was angry at herself, and womanlike, with him.

The day that followed passed like a dream to Thorpe. The sun shone with a dazzling brilliancy upon the white peaks of the Big Horn range, now visible to the northward; on favored slopes a few wild flowers timidly peeped their heads, prophetic of the warmer days of Spring which were to green the somber hills with the succulent grasses of the range; and better still, the young man thought the sharp, crisp atmosphere brought the roses to the cheeks of the girl. "This ride, alone," he said to himself, "is worth coming West."

But there is an end to all things, and so, late in the afternoon, when the stage stopped at the WS. ranch, and Helen Sawyer disappeared through the ranch-house door, Thorpe's spirits fell and he felt as though that with her the charm of the day had vanished—that it had dissolved like some alluring

mirage, and now the landscape which had seemed so interesting, so full of promise, again oppressed him with its never-ending monotony. The remaining ten miles that lay between him and his destination, however, were quickly covered, and the sudden acceleration of the stage as it dashed spectacularly into the town aroused him from his thoughtful mood, and he looked about him with an eager curiosity, for he had at last arrived at the end of his journey.

The sight was somewhat disappointing, for scarcely more than a hundred houses scattered along the sides of a single street constituted the town of Buffalo. The buildings were nearly all one story in height and built of logs, although most of them had imposing false fronts of boards, which, however, deceived no one. It was a bustling place though, for it was the metropolis and distributing point for a territory larger than many of the eastern states. The sidewalks were thronged with men, and to every post was tied a cowpuncher's horse with the inevitable Winchester hung inverted in its sheath on the left side beneath the saddle. Ranch wagons heavily loaded with supplies were along both sides of the street, for when the cattleman goes to the store he buys enough to last him for months and his bill runs into the hundreds of dollars.

With that indispensable flourish which is the

delight of drivers the world over, the coach drew up in front of the Occidental hotel, and Thorpe quickly alighted and carried his baggage into the office. There was no liveried servant to open the door, or obsequious, tip-hunting menial to carry his luggage the short distance between door and desk. He inscribed his name upon the page of the flimsy old account book which served as a register, and then he contemplated his surroundings with a lively interest not unmixed with amusement. "If Harper could only see me now!" he murmured.

The hotel office and bar were in one big room, and along the sides of the walls were the games: faro, roulette, monte, craps, and poker. A motley crowd either played or looked on; cowboys, soldiers, prospectors, and tenderfeet rubbed elbows at the crap table and at the roulette wheel; professional gamblers, off-shift from their own games, played at bank; and cattlemen, scorning games of mere chance as only fit for the simple and untutored cowpuncher, exercised their "judgment" at stud poker, where "no one with any sense kin lose for you kin see all the cards but one." Tobacco smoke befogged the air. There was the low hum of voices as bets were laid, while the incessant shuffling of feet and the occasional sharp ejaculation told of the strain of excitement under which some of the gamesters labored.

All of this was new and strange to Thorpe, but his companion regarded it with a careless indifference that evoked no comment.

They walked outside and idly watched the picturesque crowds that congested the sidewalks. Many and varied were the types, and the young man was forced to agree to his companion's proud boast that the town was a "rip-snorter."

"What time do we have supper?" suddenly inquired Thorpe. "I am famished."

The old man consulted his watch.

"You'll have to stand it about an hour yet," he replied; "but I think I know how we can put in the time."

He looked intently across the street. "Yes, he's there," he muttered, and then turning suddenly to Thorpe, he added, "and we just got time to hear it."

"Hear what?" inquired the young man.

"Why, hear how Ben Ellwood got to Congress."

Somewhat bewildered Thorpe followed his companion to the other side of the street and into the "Tin Front Livery and Sales Stables", for so read the sign painted in bold letters across the front of the building.

"Mr. Thorpe, this is Doc Richards," announced Uncle Billy by way of introduction.

"Howdy, howdy," greeted Richards, laying down a tremendous volume that he had been reading.

"Have a cheer," and he pushed around two rickety but intensely comfortable chairs such as are only found around livery-barns.

Thorpe produced some cigars and after passing them around, settled back in his chair and awaited with interest the telling of how Mr. Ellwood arrived in Congress. In the proprietor of the Tin Front he saw a very fat man, smooth shaven, triple chinned, and one who had a labored, asthmatic way of breathing that made his speech most deliberate.

Uncle Billy sparred cautiously; he discussed the weather, the cattle market, the latest big winning at poker, and other topics of general interest, and then suddenly he made the bold assertion: "Mr. Thorpe don't like the feed over to the hotel."

The young man opened his mouth in surprise and was about to deny the statement, but at a wink from his companion he remained silent.

"Well, I don't blame him none," commented Richards. "They don't know nothin' about grub in this here town. Here I am a runnin' a livery stable and I orter be runnin' a hotel—I know what good eatin' is, and I'll show 'em some day," he threatened. "People aroun' here are so dern busy and excited over cattle and gamblin' and prospectin' that they don't pay no 'tention to eatin'. There never was but one man in Wyomin', he continued, "that knowed a blame thing about eatin'—and he

sure did. Did you ever hear how he got to Congress?" he asked, suddenly turning to Thorpe.

Uncle Billy gave the young man a delighted nudge and Thorpe solemnly replied: "I never did."

"Well, it was this way," began Richards: "I was down to Cheyenne a few years ago, with a bunch of hosses, and I meets Ben Ellwood in the Interocean hotel where we was both a-stoppin'. Ben had just sold the Wild-Wildcat up in the Black Hills for a half million and he was a feelin' plenty comfortable and oppulent; wore a biled shirt with a diamond stuck on it as big as a door knob, lugged a gold watch weighin' clost to a pound and a half, and he smoked nothin' but four-bit segars. He was as tony a lookin' sport as you ever see.

"I had knowed Ben for twenty year, and he was sure glad to see me. Now Ben was a rough kind of a feller—didn't have no gilt-edged education, ner mathematics, ner furrin' languages, but he sure was high authority on what to eat and how to cook it. Yes, sir, he was a sort of a old master, so as to speak, or, as Uncle Billy remarks, he was a 'gastronomic Hoyle.' Many a time I have knowed Ben to sell a prospect for two or three hundred dollars, and then hurry down to Denver, lay it out in a few good square meals, and then go back to work ag'in in the hills. He'd a sold the Wild-

Wildcat for a few hundred if he hadn't a had the indigestion at the time—it's a fact.

"Well, as soon as Ben sees me he rushes up and shakes hands and pow-wows, and wants to know what he can do for me—you see Ben used to work for me onct and he thinks purty highly of me. I could a had five or ten thousand for the askin', but I didn't need no money, so I jes' sez to him, 'Ben, all I wants is a good square meal.' 'Sure,' he sez, and he pulls out a handful of double-eagles. 'No, no,' sez I. 'All I wants is a change in feed—I ain't had no more variety than a grass fed steer. I sure tired of these here six-bit meals where they bring in thirty or forty kinds of victuals in them little soap dishes. Such a lay-out,' I sez, 'looks like variety, but it ain't, cause it all tastes alike. What I want,' I tells him, 'is jes' two or three things, but them the best what is.'

"Ben studies a minute and sez, 'Doc, we'll have it. I'm plumb burnt out on this hotel feed myself.'

"So we goes down to the telegraph office and Ben telegraphs a fav-o-rite cook of his'n in Denver, and sez: 'Come and bring sirloin steaks, French peas, and mushrooms sufficient.' You see he takes no chance on Cheyenne. Well, sir, all the rest of that day I goes aroun' jes' a drollin' at the mouth, and that night I never sleeps a wink.

"The Denver feller ketches the night train and arrives in Cheyenne the next mornin' with all his

supplies and brings them up to the hotel. I seen 'em. Such steaks! and mushrooms! great big fellers 'bout the size of the pa'm of your hand. I could hardly wait, for the repast was set for six in the evenin', and so that afternoon I knocks them hosses down cheap jes' to get business and worry off my mind.

"That mornin' in the hotel office, Ben gives the cook—Gustave was his name, he was a Frenchman—his instructions. 'Gus,' sez he, 'they fry everything up in this country—they don't know what brilin' is. If I had my way,' he sez, 'I'd kick the bottom out of every fryin'-pan in Wyomin'. You go up to the tin store,' sez he, 'and git 'em to make you a chorcoal briler,' and he draws a pitcher of it upon the back of a envelope, but of course Gus he knowed how to make 'em too, 'and git plenty of charcoal,' sez he, and he slipped a couple of yaller boys in Gus's hand. 'And Gus,' he sez, 'of course we wants plenty of hot biscuits, and spuds, and peas, along with them briled mushrooms and sirloins. And them steaks,' he tells him, 'you don't want to git 'em too done ner too rare—grease 'em liberally with butter and season while they are a brilin', and don't forgit,' he sez, to keep lively bastin' 'em with their own juice.' Well, gentlemen, I thought I'd suffocate right there, and if I hadn't a spit right lively I reckon I would have. As it was, I had to keep a wipin'

off my chin so folks wouldn't think I had hydrophoby.

"There was a lot of people in the hotel office—big men they were, too, in Wyomin' politics. There was Pike Johnson, a big cow-man from down aroun' Laramie, and Cree Miller from Rawlins, and Billy Woodward from Medicine Bow, and Bud Simms and three or four more of them Cheyenne Warwicks. Well, one by one they jes' sorter drifted aroun' and listened to them instructions. It was curious to watch 'em; they got closter and closter and finally they was all a-standin' in a crowd aroun' Ben a listenin' as solemnly as if he was a handin' down them ten commandments from Mount Sinai. When Ben finishes tellin' Gus how to cook them steaks, Pike Johnson rushes up powerful glad to see him, then he takes him aside, confidential-like, and sez, 'Ben, I heered you tellin' that feller about brilin' that there steak. Now, if your party ain't strictly private,' he sez, 'and you got room for one more,' he sez, 'I wish't you'd cut me into your feed lot.' 'Sure,' sez Ben, and Pike's face lit up so that Bud Simms took heart and he takes Ben off to one side and he invites hisself. The upshot of the whole business is that one by one they makes application,—and they ain't the kind of fellers to do that kind a thing neither. Well, Ben invites 'em all, and then he tells Gus to git more charcoal brilers made to cook the stuff. We had

figured on two or three of them culinary orgies, but we see that if we invites any more we couldn't make it stretch for one, so we hid out till six o'clock, Ben first arrangin' for a room for the supper and havin' two baskets of champagne put on ice.

"We had four or five hours to wait, so we mosied up the street to the Lone Star where Ben wins somethin' like two hundred playin' bank. 'Nough to pay for the supper,' he sez. We fiddles aroun' town all afternoon, killin' time and workin' up a appetite, and, every nonce and anon, as the poet sez, we takes a drink. At six o'clock we goes back to the hotel and there was them seven fellers a sittin' in a row like a lot of crows on a fence. My, but they was glad to see us! They all shakes hands ag'in like we's been gone ten year. Well, we goes forthwith up to the room where the supper was, only stoppin' at the bar long enough to git seven or eight drinks, and there was the table all dyked out as purty as anything you ever see—the whitest table linen and napkins and the shiniest knives and forks. I tell you that Gustave knowed his business! We sits down and then comes in four of them big, thick, sirloin steaks, jes done to a turn. And then in comes a big platter of the purtiest biscuits that you ever sinks your teeth into—they was as light as a feather and jes' a delicate brown; and then comes the spuds, long brown slices fried in butter; and the peas, little green fellers; and last comes the briled

mushrooms steamin' hot. Well, sir, when them fellers sees all that lay-out, they jes' gives a yell—couldn't help it—and then they went to it as happy and excited as a lot of children at a Sunday-school picnic. Pike Johnson draws his gun on the nigger waiters and tells them that if they makes no mistakes that he would make 'em rich, but that a single error meant sure and sudden death. It was a sight to see them fellers eat—kinda holdin' themselves back, careless like. The first platter of biscuits melted away like a snowball in Yuma, and the next three or four fades away mysterious, like slight of hand work. Say, but them mushrooms was good! they was jes' that tender and delicate they'd melt in your mouth. And the peas! and them spuds!"

Here Mr. Richards paused and expectorated several times in rapid succession upon the stove.

"Well," he resumed, "when the boys kinda got the wire edge taken off their appetite and a little bit livened up on the champagne, for there was a nigger with a bottle behind every man's chair, there was more good fellowship to the square inch, than there has been since Butch Barnes broke the Lone Star bank, which was, I think, in the summer of eighty-one. Finally Bud Simms announce that he jes' has to stop—can't eat no more or he'd bust. Then we has segars and black coffee like they do back east. We jes' pushed our cheers back a little

way from the table, everybody that comfortable and complacent a Sioux buck couldn't have picked no quarrel with a tommyhawk; there we sets a blowin' smoke rings and a gruntin' with satisfaction, like so many buzzards after a heavy day's business, when Bill Woodward up and sez: 'Boys, I always been a great admirer of a historic galoot named Luculius. In them Roman days when mockin' bird's eyebrows and minced frog hair, and sech trifles, was considered victuals, he was a connozer some, and I always anticipates with some joy makin' his acquaintance when I approaches the celestial chuck-wagon; but I wants to say right here, that until that time, the man that can point out my fodder is none other than our distinguished feller citizen, Ben Ellwood. 'Well then you orter heered 'em holler!' We are under sech deep and everlastin' obligations to our host,' continues Bill, 'that whatever we do will be in-ad-e-quate. Therefore,' sez he, 'I proposes as a slight testimonial of our appreciation of this gladsome occasion that we sends Mr. Ellwood to Congress.' That nomination was seconded and passed with a whoop—unanamous, you bet. And that Fall, Ben was elected and sent to Washington mainly upon the proposition that it would be a sin and a shame to keep a man of his splendid appetite in Cheyenne."

As Richards finished his narrative a cowboy galloped recklessly into the barn, and the proprietor

arose and stepped out of the office to take his horse. Left to themselves the conspirators laughed heartily.

"I've heered it a hundred times," whispered Uncle Billy, "and it gets better and better every time."

"It was a classic. I wouldn't have missed it for the world," laughed Thorpe. "And it's made me as hungry as a wolf, too," he added.

"You'll like Doc," prophesied Uncle Billy; "he's one of the best hearted men you ever see—he's 'a gentleman and a scholar,' as the feller says."

"Where did he get his title?" inquired Thorpe. "Is he a doctor?"

"W-e-l-l, n-o," admitted the old man. "He ain't a regular hoss doctor, of course; we jest call him 'Doc' to make him feel good."

"And that puts him in the professional class," laughed Thorpe.

"Well," chuckled Uncle Billy, "he does do a right smart of studyin'. Look at this book—feel the heft of it," and the old man handed over the large volume which the fat man had laid down as they had entered, and Thorpe found it to be a catalogue of a Chicago mail order house. "You'll find them there *belles-lettres* the most popular literchure in the West, and Doc knows her from kiver to kiver. But if that there catalogue is Doc's diversion, as you might say; this here is his serious study," and with a broad grin the old man held

up a massive, heavily bound book, entitled, "The Encyclopedia of Cooking Recipes."

"Please don't," protested the young man; "I'm so hungry I could eat it cover and all."

"As soon as Doc comes back, we will all go over to the hotel to supper—he boards there."

As they sat idly waiting for Richards to return Thorpe heard him remark to the cowboy, "You been ridin' this mare purty hard."

"Yes," assented the cowboy, "I jes' come in from the WS ranch." Then with a trace of eagerness in his voice, he inquired, "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock," was the answer.

The man passed out onto the sidewalk and stood there for some minutes, and then Thorpe heard him greet some passerby: "Hello Bill. What time is it?"

"Six o'clock," replied Bill shortly, and stopping only long enough to look at his watch.

For some reason the cowboy's actions interested Thorpe—there was something strangely familiar about it all. "It seems like something in a story or play that I have read or seen, years and years ago," he said to himself.

"Hello, Mr. Angus," came the voice again. "How're you?"

"Howdy, Tom," returned the sheriff, and through the window Thorpse saw a short, heavy-set man stop and shake hands.

"What time is it?" asked the cowboy.

The question was becoming monotonous, and Thorpe pondered gravely over the man's anxiety.

"I've been standin' here fer a half hour waitin' fer Hank Kennedy. You ain't seen him have you?"

"No, I ain't," replied Angus, and with that the sheriff hurried on down the street.

"The man has not been standing there for a half hour," said Thorpe to himself. "Why did he lie?"

Then his analytical brain answered, "Because he wants to make it appear that he has been in town longer than he really has."

Like a flash Thorpe understood, and he suddenly remembered why the incident seemed so familiar to him. It had all happened before in a trial in which he had acted for the State, and the question that the cowboy was asking was the question upon which hung a man's life—the exact time of day.

The cowboy stood for a moment as if undecided which way to go and then peering through the window of the office he disappeared in the direction of the door and Thorpe knew that he was coming in. Quickly he drew out his watch and it was the work of but an instant to advance the hands and replace it in his pocket; at almost the same time the man entered the door. He gazed at Thorpe curiously for a moment, and then turning to Uncle Billy asked: "What time you got?"

Before the old man could reply Thorpe produced his watch and answered. "Half-past six."

The cowboy whirled quickly. "You're wrong! you're wrong!" he cried. And then in the same breath he demanded suspiciously, "Let me see?"

Thorpe held out his watch to corroborate his statement and the cowboy after a hasty glance exclaimed, "Your damn watch is a half hour fast," and without further remark he strode out into the street and disappeared into the gloom.

Thorpe sprang excitedly to his feet. "Uncle Billy," he cried, "that man has just committed some crime."

"Sh—," cautioned the old man, "not so loud. What makes you think so?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Because," whispered Thorpe, "*he is now preparing an alibi.*"

"By thunder, I believe you are right!" exclaimed the old man.

"Who is he?" asked Thorpe.

"That's Tom Horn—the killer."

CHAPTER VI.

BUFFALO.

Doc RICHARD's anecdote together with the long stage ride had whetted Thorpe's appetite to a razor-like sharpness, and at the sound of the bell he eagerly joined his two companions in the rush to the supper table. The dining-room was unpretentious: the whitewashed walls of hewn logs were devoid of ornamentation and the furniture was of the simplest kind. Four long tables accommodated the hungry crowd of ranchmen, cowboys, gamblers, and townspeople. The napery and table ware were hardly to what Thorpe had been accustomed, though it had the saving grace of being clean; the service, too, was far removed from eastern ideals, but the wail of an empty stomach is not to be denied and so he attacked the meal of elk steaks and canned vegetables with a zest.

There was a great clatter of knives and forks and but little of conversation, for the Westerner is not garrulous at meal times—he prefers his "victual first and talk afterwards." The men devoured what was placed before them with a solemnity that precluded any attempt at conversation, and Thorpe,

left to his thoughts, smiled as he contrasted the scene with one on Broadway but one short week before. He closed his eyes and conjured it all up before him, the extravagantly decorated café, the hundreds of lights multiplied many time by the costly mirrors, the gay throng at the tables. He remembered how Harper and himself had settled themselves comfortably in their chairs and watched the people stream in from the crowded street, the men in conventional evening dress, the ladies in beautiful costumes of gayer shades. Shapely necks, bare shoulders, glistening jewels, waving plumes, and the frou-frou of rustling silk all added to the charm of the kaleidoscopic vision. The musicians had changed from the sprightly medley of light-opera airs and they were now playing a voluptuous Hungarian number, and they played it well, for the wild, weird, blood-quickening strains was the music of their own country. How the 'cello wailed and sobbed! The first violin led boldly and clearly, and the reeds, subdued but always audible, at times leaped into the lead. Indeed there were more displeasing things than this. He recalled the smiling nods of his acquaintances and he remembered many of Harper's dry comments. "Now, over there," said Harper, indicating with a slight nod of his head two callow youths at an adjacent table debauching themselves upon sherbet and tarts, "is Reggy Van Dusen and his chum,

W. Windemere Wiggins, amateur champion contillion-leaders and cut-ups. Do you remember that stag dinner that Reggy gave last season at Newport, in which all the men appeared as dolls and——"

Thorpe felt a nudge at his elbow for Uncle Billy had become alarmed at his preoccupied silence.

"Here comes Bud Bradley what killed Cheyenne Pete last week," he said cheerfully, "and all the boys wondered how he done it, too," he added, "cause Bud's been drunk continuous for five years, and his hands shake so he's got to carry his loose change around in his hat. Funny thing though, he plunked Pete from across the street the second shot —his first one missed by exactly sixty-five feet for the boys measured it—and Pete didn't miss him an inch. But a drunk man is jus' that lucky!"

Broadway and the vision of the gilt and gold café vanished, and Thorpe returned to Wyoming and stern reality. Gone were the white shoulders, the flashing jewels, and the entrancing music; instead, across the street from the balcony over the entrance of the Star theater, two cornets and a trombone began to blare their discordant and inharmonious noises for the evening business, and Thorpe grimly realized that he was in the land of the survival of the fittest and where social recognition was to be obtained by the accurate use of the six-shooter rather than by that of leading cotillions. "I wonder where my niche is?" he mused. "I was

never a cotillion leader and I don't believe that I have a talent for pistol precision."

"There's Mr. Knox, the preacher, sittin' next to Bud," gossiped the old man, pointing to a broad-shouldered giant at the table; "he's tryin' to save him."

"What denomination is he?" inquired Thorpe listlessly.

"Well, he favors Presbyterian mostly, but as there is only one church in town he'll deal any kind of a game a body calls for—Baptist, Methodist, Campbellite, or any sort of play 'cept Mormon or Episcopal, which he don't sabe none."

"Did all the denominations combine to build the church?"

"I reckon they all did," chuckled Uncle Billy, "'cause everybody in town chips in. You see, the money was raised by a kitty on all the poker games —didn't take two weeks neither before they had enough and they sure build him a fine church."

"Does he have much of a congregation?"

"You bet he does. And when he ain't got none, he just goes out in the street and fetches one—that's the kind of a feller *he* is."

"I imagine that a minister would have plenty of leisure time here," observed Thorpe dryly.

"But he don't," expostulated the old man. "He's the busiest man you ever see; besides

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preachin', he runs the photograph gallery, does some prospectin' and works the steam nigger in the saw-mill. Doc will tell you the same thing."

But the proprietor of the Tin Front Livery and Sales Stables spoke not a word. He ate with a tireless industry that played sad havoc with the heaping platters about him. Thrice he dispatched the waiter kitchen-ward for more biscuits and his coffee cup was refilled so many times that the astonished Thorpe lost all count.

"No, there ain't no use in waitin' for him," said Uncle Billy, in answer to Thorpe's wondering gaze. "He'll be here an hour yet. Let's take a look at the town."

Richards grunted an acquiescence and so without further apology the two arose from their chairs and passed out on to the street.

Crowds of men thronged the sidewalks and loafed about the entrances of the saloons. Prosperous looking ranchmen, merchants and their clerks, dust-covered freighters, pasty-faced bartenders and gamblers, soldiers from Fort McKinne, excitement-loving cowboys off for a few days in town, and errant adventurers from every part of the West all combined to give the life and color of the typical cow-town.

"Why, this is livelier than Broadway!" exclaimed Thorpe.

"You bet it is," agreed his companion.

"What time do they close up?" inquired Thorpe, pointing to the long row of saloons.

"Well, I only been here three years," replied Uncle Billy, "and they ain't closed yet. Them doors ain't never been locked 'cause there ain't no keys. Yes, sir, this town is sure a rip-snorter, Just look at them electric lights!—them big lamps cost just a cent a minute."

The illumination indeed would have shamed the Great White Way itself. In front of every saloon shone one or more arc-lights; the theater boasted of four and to the pride of the citizens and the wonder and admiration of the cowboys, a star formed of smaller lamps whirled tirelessly upon its pivot over the entrance.

"In makin' a town in the West," explained the old man, "first comes a saloon and a faro layout, then the electric-light works, and latter comes the post-office and similar luxuries."

"The town is different from what I expected," confessed Thorpe; "it's much livelier."

"She ain't what you'd call a tomb," remarked Uncle Billy.

"The citizens should feel quite proud of the place."

"Proud of her! Well, I reckon we are. We are just consumed with what the Buffalo Voice calls 'civic pride.' We wouldn't swap this town for none other on the map. Why, just last week at the

theater there was a little snipe of a feller comes out with a red vest on and he carries a little cane and he sings a song about 'Dear old Broadway,' and somethin' to the effect that when you wasn't in New York you was a campin' out, and that he'd rather be a lamp-post on Broadway than to be mayor of this here town. Say, the boys didn't like them sentiments a little bit, and only for the fact that he was a pore, measly, little devil, they'd a hung him for sure. As it was everybody takes a shot at him—not to hit him, of course, but jus' to skeer him. Well, he starts back for New York immediate. Dutch Cooper sees him 'bout ten miles south of town 'bout five minutes afterwards, and Dutch says that he was just a hittin' the high places."

"He didn't wait for an encore?" laughed Thorpe.

"He sure didn't. Fact is, there was only one feller what applauded his song, and he was a whisky drummer from Chicago, and we finds out that he'd never been to New York. Some of the boys was for hangin' the drummer, but us cool-heads got aroun' and talked 'em out of it. I just out and told 'em that if they hangs that drummer Casper will tell everybody that there ain't no law and order in Buffalo, so they finally lets him go. But of course," he concluded, "he orter been hung."

They strolled along the length of the street,

threading their way through the crowd, which at places was so dense as to compel them to step from the sidewalk. The thoroughfare was but three blocks in length and at the end a solitary arc-light flickered in front of the Last Chance saloon, and beyond that the black night stretched out over the wilderness to be broken by the lights of Casper, one hundred and fifty miles to the south. As they were seeing the town they visited the only places open at that hour of the night, the saloons, and so in succession they took in the Silver Dollar, the Little Casino, the Owl, and the Maverick. To Thorpe these places seemed to be all very much alike, only differing in ornamentation, the number of gambling devices, and the reputed size of their bank-rolls. In the last place the young man drew from his pocket a coin.

"Wait," he said. "I'm going to win the price of a drink," and he started to elbow his way through the crowd at the roulette wheel, but the old man laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't do it, Mr. Thorpe," he said. "The chances are against you—over five per cent. It's a game gotten up for tenderfeet and sheep-herders—play bank if you must play. But there's nothin' in any of it," he went on. "Look at me—I've played, dealt, and owned, from the Rio Grande to Puget Sound. And what have I got? Nothin'. Forty years of it—and I'm broke to-day. They

say I'm too old to deal. Well, I guess they're right," and the old man looked at his palsied hands sorrowfully. "It's the only thing I'm fit for though," he continued, "and I guess I'll be playin' or dealin' when I cash in. I'll be buried by subscription too—they all are. Leave it alone, Mr. Thorpe."

Without a word the young man put his money back in his pocket and the two walked out of the place together.

Crossing the street they retraced their steps towards the hotel. The crowd still tarried beneath the sputtering arc-lights, yet it was orderly and quiet, and although there was an occasional outburst of boisterous good nature there was none of the quarrelsome turbulence that Thorpe had believed inseparable with frontier life. There was no blustering bravado, no truculent swaggering of "bad men," no evidence of any intent to "shoot up the town," and the young man, whose expectant curiosity had been raised by the many sensational articles in the eastern newspapers, experienced a slight feeling of disappointment.

"Shucks," said Uncle Billy, "they never had no such goin's-on in this town! All that kind of shootin' business happened in trail towns, like Hays or Dodge. You see them towns used to be great shippin' points for the Texas country. An outfit would trail a herd up from the Panhandle to Hays

or Dodge or Abilene where they would ship it off east on the railroad. Then the men would be paid off and the trouble would begin, for it wouldn't take long for some of them short-card gents to separate the boys from their six months' wages, after which the punchers would generally shoot up the proprietor and a few of his dealers, jump on their hosses and never stop a runnin' 'till they was safe back in Texas."

In front of the Capitol saloon the old man halted.

"Here's where our kind of people do their loafin'," he exclaimed. "Let's go in."

But the inspection of saloons as a diversion began to pall on Thorpe, and he hesitated.

"Frankly, Uncle Billy," he said, "I am not much of a frequenter of saloons. I have gone into more of them to-night, than I have all totaled in the past year—in fact they have no great attraction for me."

The old man expressed no surprise.

"I knew it," he said, quietly. "But you have always lived back East. Out here there is no place else to go—there is no other place open. Even if we go back to the hotel we'll find the same thing there, and it's too early to go to bed."

The old man told but the truth. In the towns of the West the saloon is the one fixed institution;

stores are to be expected, churches too, probably, and schoolhouses frequently—but the saloon, always. There is a dearth of women in the West, and a scarcity of homes; and man, being a gregarious creature, has no place to turn but to the saloon, where too frequently liquor and the lure of the gaming table ensnare his attention and encompass his ruin.

That there was no other place to go was self-evident, and so Thorpe with a bored resignation followed his companion into the barroom. But to his surprise he found the place rather interesting. There were literally refreshments for man and beast, for, much to the delight of the town dogs, a mountain stream, diverted from its natural course, flowed swiftly along a recess in the floor in front of the bar. The room was a large one and in its building ample space had been allowed for the various games of chance which it was to harbor. In the rear of the different lay-outs was a billiard table, freighted from Casper at an enormous expense, and back of that were several smaller rooms for the privacy of those degenerates who enjoyed a quiet game of draw. To the cowpuncher the Capitol saloon was a most imposing establishment, a standard of comfort and elegance by which all rivals might be compared but only to their disparagement. And this was the forum. Here in convivial intimacy meet cattleman, freighter, prospector, and

merchant, for the twofold purpose of improving their minds and allaying their thirsts.

As they entered Judge Hobbs, the concentrated judiciary of Johnson county who presided in controversies civil, criminal and probate, paused for a moment in his impassioned attack upon the idiocy of standing pat on two pair, and Thorpe was presented. He was also introduced to Mr. Billy Fidler, the proprietor; Mr. Red Angus, sheriff; Captain Swan and Lieutenant Bell from the Fort; Ranger Stone and Jack Flagg, homesteaders; also Dutch Cooper, WS puncher, and many others.

Seated in a chair in a far corner of the room was a tall, bewhiskered man, and beside him and clutching his coat lapel sat Doc Richards. To even a casual onlooker it was evident that the tall man was far from being entertained, for his face portrayed a misery that would have aroused the compassion of a more observing man, but Richards with a calm perserverance continued his observations upon mutton stews and their proper compounding. Now a cattleman abhors sheep and all that pertains thereto, and as for mutton, he would rather countenance a buzzard. John Tisdale was a peaceable man, and yet as Richards proceeded with his panegyric the sweat began to trickle down his cheeks and grim thoughts of violence began to pervade his mind. But deliverance was at hand.

"Mr. Tisdale!" exclaimed Uncle Billy delight-

edly. "The very feller I want to see! Shake hands with Mr. Thorpe."

Reluctantly Doc Richards released the coat lapel, whereat Tisdale arose hastily to his feet and shook hands with an unwonted cordiality.

"Some time ago," said the old man, "you tells me that you are figurin' on sellin' out the J T brand. Do you feel the same way about it yet?"

"Yes," replied Tisdale gravely, "I do."

"Mr. Thorpe wants to go into the business."

The ranchman looked the young man over, hesitated for a moment, and said, "Let's go in the back room and talk it over."

The deal was made, as most transactions in Buffalo were made, in the back room of the saloon, and, after an hour and a dozen drinks had been consumed and it was all over, Thorpe's counselors, Uncle Billy and Doc Richards, were of the unanimous opinion that he had secured a bargain. Thorpe folded and put in his pocket a memorandum of an agreement whereby he was, in consideration of one dollar, to have a thirty day option on the JT brand, three hundred head of cattle, ten horses, a quarter-section of land, ranch-house, corrals, and all the equipment—all for nine thousand dollars, of which four thousand was to be paid in cash and the balance in a five year note. Accepting Richards's advice Thorpe agreed to take over Tisdale's two punchers, Nate Champion and Nick Ray.

Tisdale said that they made a good team, and besides they knew the JT stuff, and they were familiar with the range. The ranch was fifteen miles south of town, and only five miles from the WS ranch-house,—which last fact had a great deal to do with the making of the contract.

"And now," said Thorpe, "business being over, let's go back to the hotel."

With a sigh of relief Doc Richards again resumed his grasp upon the unfortunate Tisdale's coat lapel and resumed his observations upon mutton stews, while Thorpe and Uncle Billy hastily escaped through the front door.

Once safely out on the street the old man looked at his watch.

"Shucks, it's only twelve o'clock—jus' the shank of the evenin', as the feller says. Suppose we go over to the honkatonk."

"The what?"

"The honkatonk—the theater."

"Isn't the show over this time of the night?" inquired Thorpe in surprise.

Uncle Billy chuckled.

"That depends," he said; "sometimes they quit at one or two, and sometimes they run all night."

Tired as he was, Thorpe's curiosity was aroused.

"All right," he said, "I'll go, but I'll only promise to stay a few minutes."

As they walked down the street in the direction

of the theater, a light appeared for a moment at the window over Doc Jeffries' drug-store, and a man slouched across the street, his hat pulled down over his eyes as though to avoid recognition. There was something strangely familiar about the slinking figure and Thorpe watched the man narrowly. The walk in front of the drug-store was brightly illuminated by the lights in the store windows, and as they approached this place Thorpe saw the man perceptibly slacken his pace so as to allow them to precede him. To Uncle Billy, unconscious of the man's suspicious actions, he said nothing, but as soon as they passed the drug-store and again were in the shadow beyond, he heard the man's boots clomping hastily on the board walk and turning quickly he saw the small, lithe figure of Tom Horn as he disappeared up the rickety flight of stairs that led to the rooms above.

"Uncle Billy, who has the front room over the drug-store?"

"Bill Forbes," was the reply, and Thorpe made a mental note of the name for future reference.

They walked along in silence until they came to the theater.

"Wait a moment," said Thorpe, halting in front of the entrance. "I've some money on me. Is this a tough place?"

The old man looked up quickly with an expression of surprise.

"Why, Mr. Thorpe," he said, "there ain't no tough places in this town—we're not on the railroad. This town is orderly. We don't have any thievin' or stealin' or none of them disgraceful fights like they have down in them railroad towns. Our calaboose ain't had a boarder for over a year."

"Do they fight in railroad towns?" asked Thorpe, anxious to appease.

"Do they!" ejaculated the old man. "Well if you'd a been in Miles City when it was the end of the line and them railroad Irish was thick, you'd a thought so. Bill Megan and me was just goin' in the Shamrock saloon one mornin', and Bill steps on somethin' round and slippery and nearly falls to the floor. 'Some one has been eatin' grapes,' says Bill to the bartender, 'and the floor,' he says, 'is covered with hay. Why don't you clean up?'

"'Hay and grapes, hell!' says the bartender. 'Them's whiskers and eyes.'"

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK-BALLS.

THE kerosene lamp sputtered feebly; at each gust of wind through the warped window casings its attenuated flame flickered uncertainly like the last expiring gasps of a creature sick unto death, and from its wavering light fitful shadows undulated upon the walls of the scantily furnished office. A case of law books stood in the corner, and its dust-covered shelves evidenced that its faded, shabby volumes had not been disturbed for a long time; a dilapidated desk leaned drunkenly against the wall, and upon it was piled in hopeless confusion, law reports, papers, letters, abstracts of title, circulars—everything in fact that had come to its owner since his last spasmodic attempt at tidiness. In the middle of the room stood a plain deal table upon which the lamp occupied a position almost the geometric center of six pairs of boots which surrounded it at equal distances apart.

"Kennedy not here yet! and it's eleven o'clock." Bill Forbes impatiently snapped his watch and thrust it back into his pocket. "He shouldn't keep us waiting like this."

To this the other five men made no comment or reply; they shifted their boot heels to more comfortable places upon the table, leaned back a little further in their chairs, and waited, silently, yet with a certain glum vexation, for they were men to whom the polite science of waiting was an accomplishment yet to be learned.

Forbes nervously filled his corn-cob pipe and the flare of the match which he noisily scratched upon the chair illumined for the moment a seamed and sallow countenance upon which was stamped the unmistakable imprint of avarice unappeased, of cupidity insatiate.

"I was in the land office this afternoon," he said, between puffs, "and I find that two of those quarter-sections we have been watching have been filed on—the ones down there on Powder River just east of Tisdale's."

"Damnation!" exclaimed Ace Gentry.

"Well, I kept telling you fellows that you had better have some one file on them," said Forbes, with the air of a man who had done his full duty.

"Now that does settle the Hole-in-the-Wall range, for sure," and Dave Martin, the owner of the famous Boot-jack brand, suddenly removed his heels from the table and pounded it angrily with his fist. "And it was the best winter range in the country," he added forcefully.

Jud Higgins said nothing, likewise Buck Harris,

too, remained silently thoughtful, but the pessimistic owner of the Bar D voiced his usual sentiment.

"This country is goin' to hell. I've said so all along. In two years we'll all be grangers."

"But what can we do, Dixon?"

"Do?" he ejaculated. "We can save these here ranges, that's what we can do. But as it is, it looks like we ain't accomplishin' nothin'."

A step was heard upon the stairs and the men listened intently.

"It's Kennedy," said Forbes.

The door opened and the foreman of the WS stepped into the room followed by a stranger. Had Kennedy been accompanied by one of London Tower's beef-eaters in full regalia the six men would have been no more astounded, and they stared as though unable to believe their eyes.

"What the devil——" began Gentry.

"Men, this is Hall," tersely announced Kennedy, by way of introduction. "He's the new boss of the WS; and he's all right."

There was an embarrassing pause. Hall bowed and curled his thin lips into the semblance of a smile, but the ranchmen regarded him with a cold suspicion and they did not respond. Sullenly they glowered at the intruder and then with questioning looks at each other, and the silence was only broken by the squeaking of the rickety chairs as they shifted uneasily in their seats.

"He's one of the old man's heirs," explained Kennedy, "and him and me has had a talk, and he fully understands the situation. He's from back East where they do things a leetle different; but he sees as how them eastern ways won't work out here, and natcherally he endorses them methods that does work."

At this second introduction Hall again bowed and stood awkwardly in the doorway, nervously fingering his hat and evidently ill at ease.

"Sit down, Hall," ordered Kennedy, pointing to an unoccupied chair.

The intruder timidly took a seat and awaited developments while three of the men conferred in the corner.

"What kind of damn foolishness is this?" savagely demanded Kennedy. "When I introduce a man and say he's all right, he *is* all right."

"Well, we never see him before," sulkily retorted Dave Martin.

"Suppose we hear from Mr. Hall," suggested Forbes diplomatically.

It was a timely suggestion and it met with instant favor, for it would not only give them an opportunity to size up the newcomer but it would enable them to find out just how much he had enjoyed of Kennedy's confidence.

Thus adjured Hall solemnly arose and began: "Gentlemen," he said, "I am a stranger to you and

I appreciate the confidence which you have shown in me." Here Mr. Dixon grunted cynically. "I am, as Mr. Kennedy has stated, joint heir with my cousin, to the estate of my uncle, the late Mr. William Sawyer; and I will be the administrator of the estate and the director of the WS ranch——"

"And I am still to be manager, ain't that right?" interrupted Kennedy.

Hall nodded impatiently and continued: "As I have many interests in the East, Mr. Kennedy will remain as manager and will represent me in my absence." Here Hall suddenly conceived the idea of impressing his audience not only of his sincerity, but with his magnitude as an orator. "I believe," he continued, "that when an individual runs athwart the destiny of a community, that it is meet and proper that the individual should either fall or be assimilated with the larger body. Where indeed would be the splendid development of the East had its triumphant march of progress been stopped every time it had collided with the so called and much vaunted constitutional rights of the individual?"

"O git down to brass tacks!" exclaimed the irritable owner of the Boot-jack brand.

If Hall heard he paid no attention to the interruption for he went on: "The chief, and I might say only, industry of the sovereign State of Wyoming is cattle raising. Now, gentlemen, if the wel-

fare of this great commonwealth is to be considered, then this industry should be most jealously guarded and protected, not only by your laws, but by the co-operation of those who are actively engaged in the cattle-raising business," and here the speaker unctuously joined his finger tips in front of his ornate waistcoat and looked impressively over his small audience, "and, gentlemen, I do not hesitate to say that you should do this by force, if necessary."

He majestically mopped his clammy brow in true oratorical fashion, and Congress, even the Senate, loomed before him. It was an inspiration and he paused for a moment as he revolved this last thought over in his mind. The politics of the state were notoriously corrupt and times without number it, and other western states had sent their vote-bought representatives to the national assembly; and furthermore he was rich and could afford it. "Yes, it's feasible," he said to himself, "and I will give the matter some thought," and with that in mind he continued his harangue:

"The situation is serious, gentlemen, more serious than you suspect. You have been lax, very lax, for I understand that settlers are coming in all the time. I have been told that only a few of the vermin have been exterminated—three or four. What does that amount to? Nothing. I tell you, gentlemen, that the number should be enlarged to

twenty, thirty, or even fifty, this year. Heroic measures should be adopted at once,—at once, gentlemen, at once." His audience was becoming restive and he hastily concluded. "And you may count upon my hearty co-operation in this matter in every possible way."

"We might send him out with a musket and see how many he could git," sarcastically remarked Buck Harris to his neighbor, Mr. Dixon.

"Naw," responded that worthy, "let him talk 'em to death."

"Well, gentlemen," said Forbes briskly, "you have heard Mr. Hall. If any of you have any objections to him staying to the committee meeting, please speak out."

Jud Higgins broke the silence: "I guess he's all right," he drawled.

"Well, then let the meeting come to order," said Forbes. "What shall be the order of business?"

"Tell Kennedy what you told us before he come in," requested Dave Martin.

"I was telling them, Kennedy, that two quarter-sections have been filed on down there east of Tisdale's."

"The devil they have! Who filed on 'em?"

"Nate Champion and Nick Ray."

"They done that for a dare," put in Gentry. "I heered 'em say that Tom Waggoner and Jim

Averill was put out of the way for filin', but that there wasn't nobody that could skeer them—so they done it jes' to see what would happen."

"They'll see purty quick," muttered Kennedy.

"I have another piece of news," said Forbes. "I was in Fidler's saloon to-night, and I saw Tisdale and that old fellow they call 'Uncle Billy,' and that fat fool, Richards, and a young buck—a tenderfoot—confabbing together; and when they goes into one of them back rooms, I stepped into the next one. You know the partitions are thin, and by placing my ear to a crack I could hear what they had to say. The upshot of the business was that Tisdale has practically sold out to the tenderfoot. Tisdale's no fool—he's been looking for some sucker to buy him out ever since Jim Averill turned up missing. Well, then I went down to the hotel and finds that the young fellow had registered as," and Forbes held a slip of paper towards the light, "as John T. Thorpe, New York."

"Why, I know him!" exclaimed Hall. "He came up from Casper with my cousin."

"Friend of your'n?" inquired Martin.

Hall shook his head.

"What kind of a feller is he?" asked Dixon.

"No good," replied Hall. He is an unsuccessful lawyer; he drinks, gambles, and he is a rake."

"Well, that ain't a goin' to hurt him none out here," commented Harris, with a grin.

"I guess he must be a purty good kind of a feller, if he's what you say he is," put in Dixon.

"He is not my kind," retorted Hall loftily.

"Well, he ain't mad about it, is he?" persisted Dixon.

"It's getting late," testily interrupted Forbes. "If you have any nominations to make, why, make them."

"Put those three new ones on the list," ordered Kennedy.

"It's all right to put down Champion and Ray," said Ace Gentry, "and I am in favor of likewise eliminating Mr. Thorpe, if he drinks and is a rake, 'cause it's our duty to purify Buffalo society; but," and Gentry became serious, "if this feller Thorpe is one of them New York dudes, he ain't goin' to trouble us none by stickin'. He'll clear out when the—well there ain't no use throwin' away money," he concluded significantly.

"That's a good idee," agreed Kennedy.

"Very well," said Forbes, "if there is no objection we will put Champion and Ray on the list, and trust that Mr. Thorpe will heed the handwriting upon the wall. Now who else?"

"Read the Powder River list," suggested Martin.

In obedience to the request the chairman read: "Ranger Stone, John Tisdale, Jack Flagg, and the ones just put down, Nate Champion and Nick Ray."

"If Tisdale's goin' to quit, take his name off," ordered Kennedy.

Forbes drew a line through Tisdale's name and remarked: "He's getting off just in time—he's a lucky son-of-a-gun."

"That cleans up the Hole-in-the-Wall district," said Kennedy. "Now read the elected on Crazy Woman."

Jake Parsons, Tom Garrison, Dink Hubbard, and Four-flush Carter."

"And Arapahoe Rowan and Bob Crow on Clear Creek completes the list?"

Forbes nodded.

"That makes twelve all together," said Kennedy reflectively. "It's runnin' into money."

"What do they cost apiece?" inquired Hall.

"Fifteen hundred."

"Gracious! That will break us!"

"Well, if you want to take the job for any less," suggested Dixon, "we'll give you the contract."

Hall shrugged his shoulders whereat the others smiled grimly.

"It ain't everybody who is willin' to undertake the job," explained Kennedy, "and what's more, it ain't everybody that can fill it."

"Well, gentlemen, is there anything else?" inquired Forbes.

There was a moment's silence and the chairman

impatiently drummed his bony fingers upon the table.

"Then if there's no further business before the committee," he said, "I'll summon the destroying angel."

He raised the curtain and picking up the lamp waved it slowly before the window.

"'A pillar of fire by night,'" he quoted, with a smirk that showed his long yellow teeth. "Moses will be here shortly."

Upon the opposite side of the street a man who had for a long time been sitting listlessly upon the edge of the sidewalk, now arose alertly to his feet and after glancing cautiously around, slouched across the dusty road in the direction of the light. He halted for a moment to allow two pedestrians to pass, and then quickening his pace he disappeared into the dark stairway where with a few nimble bounds he mounted the steps and entered the room.

The newcomer was less than the average in size; his hands and feet were noticeably small, and in the presence of the broad-shouldered Kennedy he seemed slender—even frail; yet he had the muscular grace of a panther, and his wiry frame and small waist bespoke the endurance of an Indian runner. A straggling yellow mustache vainly tried to conceal the thin lips of a cruel mouth, and the light gray, almost white, eyes fringed with yellowish, albino lashes marked him a man who

once seen was not easily forgotten. Cold, basilisk eyes he had—eyes that suggested the chill of death; eyes that had caused not a few men to recoil with a strange, inexplicable sickening feeling, as though from the gaze of some uncanny reptile; and now as they fell upon Hall they blazed with suspicion and resentment.

"He's all right, Horn," said Kennedy. "You've seen Hall out to the ranch."

"I reckon he's all right, if you say so," retorted Horn, suddenly; "but don't you git any more in—I won't stand it."

"Well, don't git hostile, Tom," soothed Kennedy, "we'll take keer of you all right. And now," he added, with a grin, "we've enlarged your list so you can give your gal a whole lot more di'monds."

Horn whirled on Kennedy, his eyes snapping viciously, but he held his tongue.

"Oh, that's all right, Tom," laughed the big foreman; "they ain't none of us a tryin' to cut you out."

"This is no time for bandying jokes," interrupted Forbes impatiently. Then turning to Horn he said, "Put Nick Ray and Nate Champion on your list."

"Well, you didn't pick out no easy ones," growled Horn.

"Easy or not," complained Martin, "you don't

never do anything—you haven't done nothin' for over a month."

"I have too," retorted Horn angrily. "If you got to have faster work, you git some one else."

"When was the last trick you turned?"

"*This afternoon.*"

"What!" exclaimed Kennedy. "You didn't tell me!"

"I ain't seen you since I done it."

"Who was it? How did it happen?" asked several in a breath.

"Ranger Stone."

"Where did you git him?" eagerly inquired Kennedy.

"I laid fer him and got him at Mud Crick crossin'. I was under the bridge when he come up."

"I seen him start for home," put in Dixon, "and I wondered if he'd ever git thar."

"Yes," continued Horn, "I waited under the bridge till he passed, and let him git 'bout twenty yards away when I stepped out and th'owed my Winchester down on him. He happened to look aroun' jes' then, and when he sees me he grabs fer his gun, but of course he was too late—he falls in the bottom of the wagon. Then I drives the team up the crick in 'mong them cottonwoods an' shoots the hosses an' sets fire to the wagon, an' then I rides like hell into town an' shows myself aroun'. "Remember now," he added, turning to Kennedy,

"I been out to the ranch all day, an' that I comes in to meet you—let's see—for what?"

"I bought a new set of harness for the buckboard late this afternoon," said Kennedy. "Say that you come in to tell me to git it."

"All right—that's the story—don't forgit it," admonished Horn.

The members of the committee discussed the killing among themselves in excited whispers, and they would have prolonged it for hours had it not been for the chairman.

"If there's nothing else before the committee, we may as well adjourn," he suggested. "And don't go out all together," he cautioned: "go out one by one."

Accepting this advice they silently and at intervals of several minutes, tiptoed down the dark stairs and disappeared into the night.

"Have you only one man employed in this work?" inquired Hall of Forbes after the others had departed.

"Only one."

"Suppose he gets killed or frightened off, where will we get another?"

Forbes laughed cynically.

"He don't take many chances. He operates mostly on the Kentucky plan."

"The Kentucky plan?"

"Yes. Ambushes 'em—shoots 'em in the back."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SAGE-HEN.

THE entrance to the theater was through the barroom. Upon the one side were the ever-present faro, roulette, and dice games, each surrounded by its fascinated crowd of players, who for the most part gambled with wooden and expressionless faces, yet some there were whose countenances mirrored their luck as the fickle goddess either smiled or frowned. On the other side and separated from the barroom by a picket fence, was the dance hall; this was deserted, for the floor is not used until after the entertainment in the theater, adjacent. Through the swinging doors at the rear of the barroom could be heard the shrill screech of violins, the loud slurring of a trombone, the boom of a bass drum and the clash of cymbals, and above all the nasal shriek of women's voices. At an expense of a dollar Thorpe purchased two tickets at the bar, and they passed through the swinging portals and into the mysterious region beyond.

The playhouse was a primitive affair. To Thorpe, accustomed as he was to the costly tapestries, the velvet carpets, the great chandeliers,

and the luxurious embellishments of the metropolitan theaters, the place was a shock and a surprise. There were no reserve seats, only hard, uncomfortable benches, no ushers, no programmes, and no removing of hats, which last fact, together with the absence of slope to the floor, made it difficult to see the stage, for a sombrero is hard to see through —or around. And as though to add to the discomfort of the place, waiters tirelessly circulated through the crowd with their monotonous cry, "Whisky, beer, and cigars, gents—whisky, beer, and cigars." High up along the sides of the walls were the boxes—the seats of the rich and haughty. A dingy muslin curtain hung in front of each box insured the occupant privacy—from the audience only, for there was no known way of keeping out the coy and thirsty ladies of the ballet, or to escape their importunities for drink. It is hardly necessary to add that although box seats could be had for the reasonable sum of a dollar, they were not desired except by persons in a frolicksome mood.

"I tell you they keep that band on the hump," observed Uncle Billy, as they took seats. "They play out in front for a couple of hours before the show begins, then they come inside and play on fiddles for four or five hours durin' the show, and the balance of the night they play in the dance hall —and they don't loaf none on the way, neither."

The entertainment consisted, for the greater part,

of songs and dances, and of an occasional sketch in which the "actors" conducted themselves apparently as the inspiration of the moment might suggest, for their "lines" were without rhyme or reason. There was no plot in these bedlams of horse play for as Uncle Billy explained, "they most always make it up as they go 'long;" and the climaxes were primitive indeed, for they invariably consisted of some kind of an assault. The comedy of hitting a man with a slap-stick, or of smashing him in the face with a custard pie, struck the audience as excruciatingly funny. The seltzer-bottle skit was omitted for the twofold reason that there was no such device in town, and that the humor of that joke was too refined and subtle.

A song and dance team had just finished their turn and now a tall, angular blonde approached the footlights and in a hoarse voice announced: "Ladies and gen'lemen, I will now sing that touching and pathetic ballad, entitled: 'The Maiden's Lament.'"

The orchestra played the introduction with a flourish and she began:

VERSE.

"When a gurrul I used *to* play
In the fields of *new* mown hay
Down on my old *south*erun home.
(*Trombone: Ta, ta, ta, ta.*)
Oh the birds, they *sung* all day

In the *merry* month of May
And I *never* wanted to wander or to roam.
(*Drum and cymbals: Bing bing.*)
Minor, accompanied by an exciting tremulo of the fiddles.

But *one* day there come a stranger
Who said *he* were a Texas ranger
And he *won* my girlish heart that d-a-y.
And from *among* the flowers,
The roses and the *bowers*
He did carry *me* a-w-a-y.

Chorus, lacrimoso fortissimo.

"Now, gurruls, take *my* advice
And *al*ways do think twice
For them villians and devils is *every*where.
Be careful of what *you* say
Or you will *surely* rue the day
That you fell in*to* a villian's snare.
(*Fiddles, cornets, and trombone: Ta, ta, ta, ta.*
(*Base drum: Bing, bing, bing.*)

She struggled through three more verses of this and retired amidst tumultuous applause and a shower of silver coin.

It was all so novel that Thorpe, notwithstanding his resolution to stay but a minute, sat contentedly upon the hard bench for an hour or more and watched the performance.

"I have never seen anything like this in the East," he said. "Where do they come from?"

"This is about as far East as they ever get," explained Uncle Billy. "They only play at cow-towns and minin' camps. Some of 'em have been

travelin' between Montana and Arizona for the last twenty years."

Next came two song and dance artists. They, of course, carried canes; wore bright red plush knee trousers and short double-breasted coats with three inch pearl buttons; and they wore shoes that clinked as they walked. There was great applause when they made their appearance, and Thorpe was told that they were old-time favorites. Their song was the worst lot of doggrel that he had ever heard.

"While strollin' out one *eve*nin'
A girl I chanced to m-e-e-t
I says, 'Don't you *leave* me!
My goodness, you look so sweet!

Chorus.

***O*, I never will forgit that night!**
(*Dance: Clickety, click, click, click.*)
O, the stars was a shinin' so bright!
(*Dance: Clickety, click, click, click.*)

At this moment the song was interrupted by a loud and violent altercation in the box immediately above; it seemed to be over the payment for some drinks. Louder and louder it grew and Thorpe lost interest in the dance team and looked up at the box in some concern.

"Looks like there is going to be some trouble," he whispered to his companion. "Shall we get out?"

"No. Sit still—it's safer." ....

The performance had stopped and actors and audience were staring at the flimsy curtains which concealed the disputants. The contention now reached a stage of the utmost violence and profanity was bandied back and forth with great heat and remarkable fluency.

"Uncle Billy, there's bound to be trouble," insisted Thorpe. "I think we had better go."

"Keep your seat," commanded the old man. "Even if they do get to shootin' they ain't likely to hit us none," he added calmly.

"Not likely to hit us!" exclaimed Thorpe. "How in thunder do you know they won't?"

Before the old man could reply there was a tremendous noise overhead, a fusillade of pistol shots, and the figure of a man fell from the box, landing almost in Thorpe's lap. The young man waited no longer; he sprang to his feet and made for the door. A hundred men were behind him bent on the same errand; all were yelling at the top of their voices and some were shooting. There was pandemonium—the stove was upset, benches were overturned, and above the uproar Thorpe could distinctly hear the boom of the bass drum and the crash of cymbals. With the agile skill of the trained athlete the young man had managed to pass most of the others in their headlong flight, and he had nearly reached the door when he felt a

restraining clutch at his coat-tail. He wheeled viciously about and saw—Uncle Billy.

"Come back!" yelled the old man.

"Let go!" cried Thorpe, vainly struggling to release himself from the old man's grasp.

By this time most of the stampeded crowd had passed through the swinging doors into the barroom and Thorpe noticed that the others gathered around and watched his struggle with grinning faces. Slowly he began to suspect that the tragedy lacked genuineness and he relaxed his efforts to escape.

"It was all a joke," panted Uncle Billy.

"But the man——"

"Was a dummy."

Thorpe reluctantly retraced his steps towards his seat.

"This certainly is one on me," he admitted, and then he laughed, for upon the floor lay a limp figure, the painted eyes staring ghastly at the ceiling, and from great wounds on its body gushed forth—hay.

"So that's the victim," he said, pushing the manikin aside with his foot.

"No, not him," replied the old man. "If you'd got to the barroom, you'd been the victim. I reckon it would have cost you clost to a million dollars for drinks," he added with a grin.

"You old fraud you!—why didn't you put me on to the game?"

"Why, it's an old play," answered Uncle Billy, "and I thought you knowed all about it—you bein' from New York," he chuckled.

"Well, anyhow, it is a comfort to know that there were a lot of others as badly scared as I was," remarked Thorpe.

The old man's chuckle broadened into a laugh and there was much slapping of backs by the others standing about, whereat Thorpe regarded them suspiciously.

"You don't mean to say," he said slowly, "that that rush for the door was all a part of the game?"

Uncle Billy nodded grinningly.

"Well," laughed Thorpe, "you people have the game reduced down to a science, and I must admit," he continued, "that I am a little shaky yet—I thought it was the real thing. Let's—," and he nodded in the direction of the bar.

The dummy incident closed the show and already the orchestra had removed to the dance-hall. As they entered the barroom they could hear the stentorian shouts of the master of ceremonies: "Two more couples this way! One more couple this way! How you fixed? All right? Then let 'er go!" And to the music of violins and piano came: "S'lute yer pardners—duck and bow," and then to the rhythm of shuffling feet came the calls: "Swing yer pardners, balance all, ladies to the center, an' gents aroun'." After five minutes of vigorous

dancing the perspiring cowpunchers hilariously welcomed the last call: "Promenade all, an' line up to the bar!"

"Yip, yip, yip!" they yelled, and they charged through the gate dragging their no less eager partners with them. For the next five minutes the four bartenders had all they could do wait upon the dancers that stood three deep in front of the bar, and Thorpe took the opportunity to look the crowd over.

He noted that the women were young and, in a way, good-looking. They were not, however, the kind that he had known, for their hands and feet were large and their ankles thick—they lacked not only the intellectual charm of the patrician, but also that symmetry of outline that comes only after generations of good breeding. The men were the typical broad-shouldered, small waisted, sinewy cowboys of the West; happy and excited they were, and thirsty too, for many of them were experiencing their first night in town after many months on the range. The utmost good nature prevailed, the women seemed to enjoy themselves as much as the men, and as Thorpe watched their antics and listened to their laughter, he felt the blood quicken in his veins, for the spirit of merriment is an infectious one, and he was a very human man, and a lonesome one, too.

"If I don't get in with that crowd," he muttered, "it will be because they won't let me."

The rush at the bar was finally over and a cornet in the dance-hall sounded a sort of a preliminary fanfare as a notice to get ready for the next dance.

"Uncle Billy," said Thorpe, "I'm not as tired as I thought I was. Let's watch them a while."

"You bet we will!" exclaimed the old man. "I used to be purty good at that kind of thing thirty years ago, and I like to watch them yet."

They leaned against the picket fence and watched a quadrille. To the young man from the East it was a novel and interesting sight; somewhere, in one of the yellow papers, perhaps, he had read that the Bowery waltz was the only dance that our country has produced, hence it might be called our national dance; he had seen that waltz and he remembered how the dancers hooked their chins over each other's shoulders and slowly and solemnly revolved to the strains of lugubrious music—a sad, mirthless affair, and he could but contrast it with this dance of the West. The square dance, as danced in the West, is the incarnation of spirited and hilarious activity; is the apotheosis of animation, of ginger, of go, of "git up and git." Not a false move was made, for the dancers were experts. The men jigged on the corners in perfect time, and they swung their partners with such an exuberance of good spirits that Thorpe had visions of ankles and petticoats describing horizontal circles a yard or more removed from the floor.

"Uncle Billy," he exclaimed, "this beats the *Moulin Rouge* to death."

"What's the *Moulin Rouge?*" inquired his companion.

"It's in Paris, but I haven't got time to tell you about it now," he replied, and there was a ring of boyish excitement in his voice that made the old man smile.

"We have about everything here that they have there," said a soft voice at his elbow, "except the windmill."

Thorpe turning beheld a woman garbed in a close fitting gown of gray, a costume that accentuated every line of her splendid figure. Her face was oval and her features regular; cherry-red lips disguised the fact that her mouth was just a trifle hard; large, expressive gray eyes that were regarding him with scant concealed curiosity, and a glorious mass of tawny yellow hair completed a picture that made him gasp.

"You have been there?" he managed to ask.

"Yes," she replied smilingly, "I have been there."

"You have been to the Moulin Rouge—in Paris?" he exclaimed incredulously.

The woman laughed, and Thorpe was cognizant that her tones were musical and well modulated.

"Yes. And I might add," she continued archly, and as though to even more increase the bewildered

amazement depicted upon the young man's face, "that I have seen the dances of the nautch girls of Bombay, the geisha girls of Nagasaki, and the hula dancers of Hawaii, but for dancing for the real fun of dancing, these square dances of the West beat them all."

Thorpe turned half around. "Good-bye, Uncle Billy!" he called.

A faint smile of amusement played over the woman's face as he turned quickly back to her.

"I must talk with you—it seems ages since I talked with a woman," he said. "For days I have heard of nothing but land and cattle—I'm tired. But let's have something—that is if you have time?"

"Always," she laughed. "Come with me."

She led the way to a place curtained off at the front end of the bar which served as an office.

A rug, a desk, a small table and two chairs comprised the furniture of the room, but to these, as well as the few tasty etchings on the wall, the young man was oblivious.

"I must confess to being a little tired myself," she said wearily. "But sit down."

As she pushed over a chair to him, he noted the jewels on her fingers and his discerning eyes told him that they were genuine—and costly. She took a seat opposite and gazed at him with a frank curiosity.

"You say that you have been talking nothing but land and cattle—you certainly are not a cattleman."

"No, not to-day," he replied; "but probably to-morrow, or as soon as I get into business. But enough of business! Let's order something. How about a pint?" he suggested, recklessly disregarding his resolution to quit such extravagances.

"If it is the same to you," she said, smiling at his prodigality, "I will take a lemonade; and I believe that a little plain whisky would be better for you than the wine that they serve here—and besides it's cheaper."

The young man stared incredulously.

"You are a wonder. You are the first woman that I ever met who preferred lemonade to champagne. I'll believe anything now."

"They say that you have come West for experience," she returned.

The woman's beauty, the charm of her manner, and the pleasing modulations of her voice thrilled him with a strange pleasurable excitement. He marveled at meeting such a woman in such a place.

"I must admit that I am curious," he said, as he gazed into the fathomless depths of the gray eyes before him, "tell me about yourself."

"That would be rather a long story," she replied with a tantalizing smile. "But suppose you begin first, for I was about to make the same request of you."

"All right," he acquiesced. "My name is John Thorpe, from New York, am about to go into the cattle business, which I know nothing about.

"You could hardly be called garrulous," she laughed.

"I will be satisfied with a like confidence from you," he insisted.

"Well, then," said the woman, "my name is Cora Sands, from nowhere, and I am *not* going into the cattle business which I know *all* about. And now that we know each other so well," she added, "would you mind dancing with me? This is ladies' choice you know."

"Will a duck swim?" exclaimed the young man springing to his feet.

They elbowed their way through the crowd and on to the polished dance floor.

"Hey, mister!" shouted a large red-faced man at the gate, who officiated in the combined capacities of collector, caller, and bouncer. "Fork over two bits."

Thorpe fumbled in his pocket for the change but a slim white hand stayed him.

"Remember, Abe, this gentleman don't pay."

Big Abe stared in astonishment and it was only after a perceptible effort that he recovered himself. "All right," he said. And then with a broad grin he waved the bewildered Thorpe a generous welcome.

The music struck up a lively quadrille and the dancers swarmed through the gate, but the woman held up her hand and it suddenly stopped.

"Play a waltz," she commanded imperiously.

To Thorpe's surprise she was instantly obeyed and without further thought he seized her in his arms and they floated away across the polished floor to the strains of the Blue Danube. It was a dance that he was not soon to forget. Years afterwards, when, perhaps, he would have put the thing from his mind, it haunted him; there would arise before his eyes the lights of the dance-hall, the crowd of spectators leaning on the picket fence, the women and the unnatural brightness of their eyes, and he could hear the shrill harmony of the violins and the measured beat of the piano accompaniment, he could feel the yielding form of the woman and the soft pressure of her hand, he could smell the perfume of her hair, and as all these memories would come back to him he would again experience that indescribable thrill which he had always felt in her presence.

The waltz is not a popular dance with cowboys, but they stood against the walls and watched the two graceful figures admiringly; and when the music stopped they clapped their hands in enthusiastic applause.

In the crowd that leaned upon the fence were two men who seemed more interested and who

watched the swaying couple even more intently than did the others. The larger man grinned as though the sight was highly amusing, but his companion evidently did not share his humor, for he looked on sourly and a grim scowl overspread his narrow countenance.

"Well, Tom, it sure does look like you lost out, don't it?" and Kennedy chuckled at the other's discomforture.

The small man made no reply other than a gesture of impatience.

"Yes, sir, it's too bad, Tom," went on Kennedy, "but your number does seem to be single o in the pea green. What you need is some dancin' lessons. You can bust a bronc, and you can rope a steer, and you compare right favorably with South Africky as a di'mon' producer,—but them things don't seem to do you no good. You got to git some style about you if you want to draw cards in this game," and Kennedy punched his companion in the ribs as though to emphasize the exquisite subtlety of his witticisms.

"Leave me 'lone," snarled the small man.

"How much you got invested in them di'monds, Tom?" inquired Kennedy with mock solicitude.

To this question the other made no reply for the music had stopped and the object of his malignant stare was coming towards the gate. Kennedy grinned expectantly as he watched his wrathful com-

panion worm his way through the crowd and turning to Uncle Billy who was standing beside him said, "Now we're goin' to have some fun. Watch Tom skeer that dude to death."

Before the old man could interfere the angry man had clutched Thorpe savagely by the arm.

"You git out of here," he commanded.

"What for?" inquired Thorpe in surprise.

"'Cause I say so," was the sullen reply.

For a moment Thorpe was dazed. He saw the crowd of serious faces before him, and he was vaguely conscious that conversation had ceased and that the room was still; then he looked full into the malevolent face of Tom Horn and instantly he saw red. Yet infuriated as he was there was no cry such as enraged men usually utter, there was no warning note; with a silent and sudden violence he wrenched himself from the man's grasp and dealt him a heavy blow in the face.

Instantly there was wild confusion. Horn went reeling to the floor, and from somewhere in the crowd the huge bulk of Jud Higgins appeared. Whether his mission was peace or war could not be determined, perhaps he did not know himself, yet on he came, arms distended, eyes protruding, and his bovine face apoplectically red from anger or exertion, perhaps both.

"Stop!" he yelled.

If his intentions were belligerent it was well, if

peaceable it was unfortunate, for no sooner had he come within arm's length of the infuriated Thorpe than that individual feinted with his left, whereupon Higgins held his fists in front of his head as if to block the blow. Boxing is not unlike chess and in the game of fistiana the countermove to the position which Higgins had assumed called for what is known to the sporting public as a "right hook." The mark was fair and open, there seemed an hour to deliver it, and Thorpe, coolly measuring his distance, stepped in and struck the blow with such precision and power that the big man sank to the floor like a felled ox.

To Higgins no one paid the slightest attention. All eyes were upon Tom Horn, and now as he scrambled to his feet there was a wild rush for the door for the man had drawn his revolver. But before Horn could use his weapon, Kennedy's powerful arms were wrapped around his in a bear-like embrace from which the maddened cowboy struggled viciously to free himself, and while thus restrained Big Abe, the bouncer, charged through the crowd and wrenched the weapon from his hand.

"Here, you big feller! You take your han's off!" vociferated Kennedy and he gave the bouncer such a sinister look that that gentleman did as directed and without hesitation.

"Lemme go!" screamed Horn, struggling violently.

Kennedy shook his prisoner as a dog would a rat.

"What in hell is the matter with you!" he shouted. "Ain't you got no sense!"

Thorpe was so excited that he hardly knew what had happened, and it was only at the sound of the woman's voice that his faculties returned and he regained his self-control.

"Stop!" commanded the woman, and in almost instant obedience the uproar of the surging crowd ceased. "What does this mean?" she demanded, and her gray eyes blazed with the sinister glint of a polished bowie.

"Tom tried to draw his gun on your frien'," explained Abe.

She turned to Kennedy who was still holding his squirming captive.

"Let him go," she commanded.

Horn released stood uneasily blinking and fidgeting before the contemptuous gaze of the woman, and he tried in vain to meet the eyes that seemed to pierce him through.

"Tom Horn," she began with a low vibrant voice, "you miserable, cowardly sneak! That man carries no gun and you knew it."

"I didn't neither," sulkily mumbled Horn.

"Don't talk back to me!" she cried, her voice trembling with passion. Then she turned upon him

like a tigress: "Now, you get out of here—and you stay out. You know me!"

She watched the man as he slunk through the door, and then turning to Thorpe smilingly said, "I want another lemonade, will you join me?"

As one in a dream he followed her back to the small table and the two chairs. "Was there ever another such woman?" he asked himself.

Seating himself he contemplated the woman with a gaze that bespoke an admiration beyond the power of words.

"Well, you certainly are a world-beater," he said at last.

"Oh, it was nothing," she replied, with a depreciatory shrug of her pretty shoulders. "Let us forget it."

For hours Thorpe sat and looked and listened to the fascinating woman opposite him. She told him much of the life he had elected to lead, and he learned of the trials and tribulations of the cattleman, and of the troubles on the range.

As he sat and listened, a willing captive to the charms of the fascinating, woman, he little knew that the news of his encounter in the dance-hall had traveled the length of the street and even now the principal topic of conversation in the saloons was the probable fate of the man who had dared affront Tom Horn, "the killer." And little did he know that the public in the excitement of the moment had given

him a name by which he was to be known the length and breadth of Wyoming—"the New York Kid."

But at last the woman consulted her watch. "Why, it's nearly mornin'," she exclaimed. "I must be going."

She arose to her feet and extended her hand. "I will see more of you, John Thorpe—I hope."

He grasped her hand warmly. "I hope so too. Where can you be found?" he inquired earnestly.

"Right here."

"Here?"

"Yes," she replied, laughing at his bewildered expression. "Right here."

"Well, I won't be too curious on first acquaintance, and so I will say, Good-night."

He walked out into the barroom where he found Uncle Billy, Sheriff Angus, and the taciturn Arapahoe Rowan waiting for him.

"They heered you had some trouble," explained Uncle Billy with a grin, "so they come down to take you home."

"All right, gentlemen," acquiesced Thorpe good-humoredly, "but," and he turned to the sheriff, "in the name of all the saints who is that woman?"

"I don't know her name," replied Angus. "She runs this whole lay-out,—theater, gamblin', bar, and dance-hall. We call her the Sage-Hen."

CHAPTER IX.

"I'LL STICK."

BUFFALO, WYO.

DEAR HARPER:

I did not stop at Cheyenne as I had planned, but came straight through to this point, arriving here day before yesterday after almost five days of travel.

This town is in the very heart of the cattle country, and it is a very lively place I can assure you. It is nothing like what I expected: it has nothing in common with those sleepy villages of the farming districts, and the rural atmosphere is conspicuously absent. Indeed the dissimilarity in every respect is so great that it is hard to describe—even the atmosphere is different. There is a kind of a harsh angularity to the country and the people—a suggestion of a raw, primitive severity. The landscape is angular—a jumble of hills and precipitous "buttes" they call them; the inhabitants are angular, especially as to shoulders and jaw, yet there is nothing of the lout or yokel in their appearance, for they are a keen, active, alert kind of people. The very animals have few of the eastern

characteristics—the farmer's plump horse and his fat cattle are not to be found, for in this country the horses are small and wiry and the cattle thin, long-horned creatures and as wild as hawks. These types are typically western: the people being for the greater part natives of the neighboring states, and the stock the half wild descendants of that brought into Mexico by the Spaniards some three centuries ago. It is all a very interesting study.

Through the courtesy of an old gentleman whom I met on the train I learned of this place, and at his suggestion I came here. This intimate of mine is a quaint, lovable old character, best described as a gentleman of the old school. I know you will smile when I tell you that by profession Uncle Billy is a gambler, and I shudder to think what some of my Wall Street friends would say.

I have met everybody of importance in the town and they are charmingly informal—they call me "Johnny" and refer to me as "the New York Kid." In fact Uncle Billy is the only man in town that prefixes a "Mister" to my name, and he, with the punctilious politeness of a gambler, insists upon it. I rather imagine that I won this last title, "N. Y. Kid," through an altercation I had in the theater barroom (yes, we have a theater) the first night of my arrival. A drunken cowboy, jealous of my attentions to his girl,—a stunning blonde, by the way,—ordered me out of the place and I knocked

him down. The affair didn't amount to much, but the next morning I was told that the fellow is not only a "killer," but that he is a "gun-artist" with a record—all of which may be a matter of great local pride, but somehow I am not enthused over it. In the meantime speculation is rife, and all Buffalo awaits the outcome with a cheerfulness that is depressing.

I have already, through the good offices of my friend Uncle Billy, obtained an option on some ranch property, and if it is as described I will close the deal at once. The property is known as the "JT" ranch and is about fifteen miles south of here (considered in this country to be merely in the suburbs, for these cattlemen think nothing of living a hundred miles from town) and it is located in what is known as the "Hole-in-the-Wall" country. I came through this district on the stage and it is quite a picturesque valley. The hunting is good in that part of the country, so they tell me, and you must come out when I get located and we will have a few weeks of deer and grouse shooting.

Now comes a strange piece of news. A. Alfred Hall is out here. Truly "the world is small," and also "them that has, gits," as we say in Buffalo, for Hall has inherited another fortune. He has fallen heir to one half the estate of his uncle, who died recently leaving a large sum of money and also vast ranching interests. I know you will remember

Hall—he was a senior our freshman year at college, and he belongs to most of the clubs that you do. Why couldn't it have been some good fellow? You know what a thoroughly contemptible pup this fellow is. And he is my nearest neighbor!

But I nearly forgot to tell you of making the stage ride with Hall's cousin, a Boston school-marm. It seems incredible that she could be related to Hall for she is a dear, sweet girl, and I wish she was here to stay; but she only came out to claim the other half of the Sawyer estate, and I imagine she will soon return East, move into the Back Bay neighborhood, entertain Browning clubs, and begin the cultivation of a fad. I could write pages of Miss Sawyer but for a dearth of adjectives. She is a splendid type of the brunette with the most soulful brown eyes——

At this point Thorpe leaned back in his chair, puffed thoughtfully at his cigar and wondered if it would not have been better to have left out the stage coach incident. He was about to tear up the page when a cowpuncher clattered into the hotel office.

"Say, fellers," said the newcomer, "that Sawyer gal from back East is out in front of the post-office in the WS buckboard, and s-a-y, she sure is a peach!"

Instantly a half dozen men whirled about from their seats at the faro layout and regarded the

speaker with a cold disapproval. The man fidgeted nervously under their frigid stare and then awkwardly withdrew from the room. It was evident that to speak of a woman in a barroom was not a popular thing to do, even in Buffalo. Nevertheless, one by one the players cashed in their chips and, with as great a show of indifference as they could muster, sauntered over to the post-office where they made successive inquiries for mail—which action puzzled the postmaster greatly, for to his certain knowledge none of them had asked for or received a letter for the past five years.

Thorpe hastily closed his letter——

I must hurry now, for there is a friend impatiently waiting for me at the post-office.

Be sure and write me a long letter with all the gossip about the fellows that I know. I will be devilishly lonesome for a while and I must hear from you often.

Hastily yours.

THORPE.

Then hurriedly sealing the letter, he set out carrying it conspicuously in his hand.

Helen Sawyer was an observing young woman, and now as she sat in the WS conveyance she became suddenly impressed with the volume of business transacted at the post-office. Quite a crowd

had gathered in front of the little building and the buckboard, the horses, the harness, and in fact everything but the occupant of the vehicle was scrutinized with that careful and painstaking regard for detail that characterizes idle men. A less modest woman might have deduced that she was the occasion of this sudden interest in buckboards, but the thought never entered the girl's head.

Suddenly she saw Thorpe in the crowd and involuntarily she gave him a bright smile of welcome. The young man was clean now, his cheeks had the glow of perfect health, and as she looked into his strong, manly face, she was struck with the sudden conviction that John Thorpe was handsome.

"Why, good morning," he greeted, in apparent surprise. And then to the envy of the others and to the secret embarrassment of the young woman, he coolly climbed up and took a seat beside her.

The girl winced as she thought what her cousin would say, for Hall had not been fulsome in his remarks about the young man after she had told him of their stage ride. Even now she could hear her cousin's words: "He's a sport, a poker-player, a rake; he drinks, smokes,—has all the vices. He is not the kind of a man for you to associate with. Besides he is liable to prove a demagogue, identify himself with the rustler element and give us trouble."

Yet she could not help liking John Thorpe. There was something magnetic in his presence,

and she confessed that there was a charm in his soft baritone voice; his sturdy broad shoulders suggested everything that was masculine, and his bearing was that of the gentleman born; he was a college man, which was something,—and then he had blue eyes. Why the color of his eyes should interest her she did not know—she only knew that it did.

"With your permission," said the young man easily, "I will ride back with you, and then if you will lend me a horse I will look at my country-seat, receive the homage of the tenantry, and all that sort of thing."

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I mean that I have virtually closed a transaction by which I will come into possession of the Tisdale barony and also the castle, consisting of two rooms, and all the hereditaments, real and personal, to have and to hold and so forth,—but incidentally I become your nearest neighbor. Now congratulate me."

"Why, certainly," she said, but her voice was spiritless for she could foresee trouble.

The driver, Dutch Cooper, got the mail, climbed into the front seat, and they left the crowd of cow-punchers staring wistfully after them as they turned the corner and into the Casper road. It was a ten-mile drive and should have taken a couple of hours, but Cooper, anxious to please, kept the team in a

brisk trot, for which industry Thorpe cursed him inwardly.

Only once did the conversation become serious, and that was when she commented upon the growing trouble between the cattlemen and the settlers.

"I do hope," she said, "that this rustling will be stopped, and that the community will become quiet and law-abiding."

"I have been told that rustling is now one of the lost arts," he returned, "and that the cattleman's real grievance now is the fences."

"The fences?" she exclaimed inquiringly.

"Yes, the fences. You see," he explained, "these settlers are nearly all hay-raisers; they homestead a quarter-section of land on some stream. and the first thing they do is, of course, to fence in their hay meadow to protect it from the range cattle. Now almost invariably their fences include a water hole—perhaps the only one, in the dry season, for miles around. You can easily see how this destroys the range for grazing purposes."

The girl nodded gravely.

"But the most deplorable part of the whole affair," he continued, "is the violence. And it is always some settler who is—is injured. Never has a big owner or his employee been harmed."

"I must look into this," she said thoughtfully. "If I am to be part owner of a big ranch, I must not shirk the responsibility."

"Good for you!" exclaimed the young man admiringly.

"But how did you learn of all this?" she inquired.

Thorpe blushed.

"Well," he said, "I have been quite busy since my arrival here, looking into local conditions." Which statement was literally true.

Further discussion was cut short by their arrival at the ranch-house, and to the girl's consternation she saw her cousin standing upon the porch. Thorpe assisted her to the ground and then with his arms full of purchases and a conciliatory smile upon his face, he approached the house.

"Say, Miss," said Dutch Cooper cautiously, as she turned to go, "all that talk that young feller was a-givin' you, was on the square. There's goin' to be more trouble," he added, lowering his voice, "there's goin' to be hell a poppin'."

Hall watched the approaching couple with a lowering brow; his sullen nature was outraged at Thorpe's presumption, and besides he saw in him a menace, for he had been dreaming of late of the sole control of the estate.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hall," greeted Thorpe. "It seems like being back in New York to see you here."

Hall's only response was a nod, and although a nod was all the cordiality that Thorpe had expected,

it was with difficulty that he preserved a calm exterior.

"Mr. Thorpe wishes to borrow a horse," explained the girl. "He is on his way down to the JT ranch."

For a full minute Hall made no reply; he looked Thorpe over with a cold deliberation, and then as he turned on his heel to enter the house he tarried on the threshold for a moment and said, "We are not running a public stable here."

Thorpe flushed crimson and involuntarily he clinched his fists. "If it wasn't for the girl!" he muttered.

"Wait!" It was Miss Sawyer who spoke. She looked more beautiful than Thorpe had ever seen her; she was standing erect, her shoulders squared aggressively, and her face was flushed in righteous indignation. "Mr. Thorpe, you will please take that buckboard and Cooper will drive you anywhere you want to go—if it's to Kamchatka!" she added passionately. Then turning to her astonished cousin, she exclaimed with a voice that trembled with emotion: "How dare you!"

Thorpe could have hugged her in sheer admiration, but instead he said, "No. I couldn't think of it, Miss Sawyer, for one half of the buckboard belongs to Mr. Hall. I will walk," and then with a last admiring look at the girl he set out down the

road and Helen Sawyer rushed into the house in tears.

It was five long miles to the JT ranch, and Thorpe, as he trudged along the dusty road, alternately cursed Hall and grinned rapturously as he pictured the angered girl and recalled her words to her discomforted cousin.

"By George, I like that girl!" he exclaimed, and so earnest was he that an entire colony of prairie dogs dived precipitously into their holes.

It was almost dark when he arrived at the JT ranch, but he recognized the place instantly from Tisdale's description, and he was delighted with the outlook. The ranch-house nestled cosily in a grove of cottonwoods about a quarter of a mile from the road. Powder river, just beyond the corral, promised brook trout for the table, while thickets of willows and alders hinted of grouse. Beyond, across the stream, was the hay-flat which was to furnish winter feed for his growing herd; and over all towered the white peaks of the Big Horn range, silent and immutable.

As Thorpe opened the door he was greeted by the cheerful glow of embers in the fireplace, and from the kitchen there came the appetizing odor of frying bacon.

Nate Champion dropped the skillet and peered through the kitchen door.

"Well, I'm dogged if it ain't the new boss!" he

ejaculated. "Howdy, howdy," and his broad palm closed around the young man's hand in unmistakable warmth.

"But how did you know who I was?" inquired Thorpe, somewhat astonished.

"By them short-tailed boots and that hard-boiled hat," replied Nate. "I would have knowed you anywhere."

A muffled figure lay upon a bunk at the end of the room and this Nate shook vigorously.

"Nick! Nick!" he yelled. "The new boss is here. Wake up!"

Nick Ray threw off the blankets and sat upon the edge of the bunk rubbing his big knuckles into his eyes sleepily. It was some moments before the drowsy man could comprehend the situation and then he welcomed Thorpe heartily.

"You see Nick didn't git much sleep last night," explained Champion, "and he was jes' a takin' a little snooze."

"What's the matter, Nick?" inquired Thorpe. "Too much red liquor?"

Ray shook his head. "No," he said, "we had a little trouble aroun' here last night, and I put in a good deal of time prowlin' aroun'."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Come here," said Champion, "and I'll show you."

Thorpe followed him across the room.

"See here," he said, and he pointed to a jagged hole over the head of the bunk.

"Why, what happened?" asked Thorpe seriously, for he could see that it was a hole made by a bullet of large caliber.

"Well," said Nate, "I was a sleepin' here and Nick was a sleepin' over yander," and he pointed to the bunk at the other end of the room, "and about an hour or so before sun-up, some gent jes' shoves his gun through the door and cuts loose. And say, I don't want no bullet to come no closter neither! It jes' missed my noggin' by 'bout an inch."

"This is bad," said Thorpe gravely. "But go on."

"The mean part of it," continued Champion, "was this: I was awake and I hears the noise when the door opened, but I thinks it is Tisdale a comin' back from town. I has my gun under my piller, and if I had 'spicioned it was some other galoot, I could a been ready and ketched the gentleman."

"Who do you think it was, Nate?"

"Well, that's the question. If I knowed, you could attend the gent's funeral to-morrow. Same party I reckon, as got Jim Averill and Tom Waggoner."

During supper the recent killings were discussed. There had been a number of them and the victims had all come to their end the same way—shot from

ambush on some lonely piece of road or out on the range. There had never been any attempt at justification of these killings, except a vague, intangible, and untraceable rumor that the dead men had been rustlers.

"I don't know who's doin' it," said Ray; "but it's the big outfits what's havin' it done."

"Sure," agreed Nate.

Thorpe was silent, but he felt intuitively that they were right.

After supper and the dishes had been washed, a ceremony into which the young man was initiated, they lit their pipes and repaired to the bunk room, which also served them as parlor, reception hall and library.

"I tell you," declared Nate, kicking a chair near the fire, "they ain't nothin' quite so comfortable as to surround a good meal, and then to sit in front of a log fire with a good old corn-cob pipe in your face," and he looked complacently around the room which was to him the last word for luxury and comfort.

Indeed there were less cheerful places, for the light from the blazing logs illumined the big room to the furthermost corners. The antlers of elk and deer, and the horns of mountain sheep were on the walls, and from them hung a riotous confusion of hats, coats, guns, and articles of household necessity. Upon the floor in front of the fire sprawled the two

dogs, Shep and Bull, who dozed blissfully, sometimes twitching a toe or opening an eye to manifest an ecstatic and inexpressible content. To Thorpe the picture was a pleasing one and he became possessed with the proud and satisfying feeling of proprietorship. It is a very satisfying feeling, this, and when he thought of the hall bedroom which he had escaped and left so far behind him, he sighed a great sigh of content.

"Now look at Shep," said Nate, blowing a ring of smoke towards the rafters, "he's dreamin' he's pursuing a jack-rabbit and only one jump behind—see his legs a twitchin'. I knowed a Portugee sheep-herder onct what had a dog that was dern near human he was that smart. Why, that dog was smart enough to run the business if he could a hired a man to keep books. He jes' nacherly——"

The dogs had suddenly jumped to their feet growling and the rapid hoofbeats of a galloping horse could be heard in the darkness.

"Git in the other room out of the light," said Champion quietly; "we can't tell who to suspect these days." And at the same time he grabbed his Winchester from the corner and Thorpe heard him hastily pump a cartridge into the firing chamber.

Nearer and nearer came the rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs, and the dogs were now barking loudly.

"Shut up!" commanded Ray, and they slunk back, but growling ominously.

The rider was evidently in a hurry, for they heard him stumble over some loose boards near the front of the house and then upon the platform that served as a porch. Champion stood at a "ready" when the door was flung open, a man stepped into the room and they saw the pale and excited face of John Tisdale.

"They got Ranger Stone!" he cried.

"What do you mean?" demanded Thorpe excitedly.

"He's been killed—ambushed," was the reply.

"Here, men," interrupted Champion sharply, "help tack some blankets over these here windows. I don't want to git plugged from the outside."

Bed-clothing was stripped from the bunks and hurriedly tacked before the windows. Then Champion made a careful inspection from the outside.

"She's all right, boys," he reported. "You can't see a thing."

"Now," said Thorpe, turning impatiently to the old man, "tell us about it."

"Bill Johnson and one of them Diamond S punchers found him," said Tisdale, "in a bunch of cottonwoods on Mud crick. His wagon was burnt and his hosses was shot, and he was purty badly chawed up by the wolves. Bill calculated he'd been dead about two days. We found out that he

started for home Tuesday afternoon and he ain't been seen since—until he was found to-day."

Thorpe sprang excitedly to his feet. "Tuesday afternoon then he was killed?"

"Yes, that's what we all think."

"Then I know the man who killed him!"

"Who? who?" demanded Champion and Tisdale in a breath.

"Tom Horn!"

"What? That white-eyed killer!" exclaimed Nick Ray savagely. "I'll git him to-morrow."

"But how do you know it was Horn?" demanded Tisdale.

Thorpe then rapidly told them of the incident in the Tin Front stable upon the day of his arrival, Tuesday. He told them of Horn's repeated inquiries as to the time, and of his lie to Sheriff Angus about waiting a half hour for Kennedy. After hearing this story they were of the unanimous opinion that his deduction was correct.

"But then," concluded Thorpe, "the evidence is too slight to convict him on."

"I'll do the convictin'," said Champion grimly.

"You don't mean that——"

"Yes, that's what I mean. I'm goin' to git that gentleman the fust thing in the mornin'."

Tisdale nodded his head approvingly.

"But we might be wrong," insisted Thorpe.

"No, we ain't," retorted Nate heatedly. "Didn't he try to git me and Nick last night? He ain't no good nohow. He's been thick with Hank Kennedy, and Ace Gentry, and Dave Martin, and that bunch. I see him with 'em, and when he sees me, he kinder slinks off. It looked 'spicious at the time, but I clean forgot about it. Yes, sir, that gent's going to git his fixins the fust thing in the mornin'."

"Did the boys tell you what happened last night?" asked Tisdale.

Thorpe nodded.

"It's a turrible state of affairs, Mr. Thorpe," said the old man. "If it was in the open it wouldn't be so bad, but this shootin'-in-the-back kind of business is what gits on a feller's nerves—I ain't felt safe for over a year. I'm gittin' too old for this shootin' business, and to tell you the God's honest truth," he added, "that's why I wanted to git shed of this here ranch. But I'm goin' to be square with you and I'm goin' to ask you not to take it. Pass it up, Mr. Thorpe," pleaded the old man. "I got a kind of a feeling that you'll be the next one to go. You ain't got no experience at this kind of business and they'll git you easy. If you take my advice you'll pass it up."

The two cowpunchers watched Thorpe's face narrowly; the thought that came to both of them was: "He will quit." Indeed it was a situation

"I'LL STICK," HE SAID DETERMINEDLY.

The Invaders

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that would have tried the courage of any man; but John Thorpe never hesitated.

"I'll stick," he said determinedly.

Nate Champion and Nick Ray jumped to their feet. "Put her there," cried Champion, extending his hand. "We'll stick with you!"

CHAPTER X.

BILL FORBES.

BILL FORBES, attorney-at-law, notary public, and perennial candidate for the office of District Judge, for the fourth time read the typewritten document that lay upon the table before him. "Yes, it's all right," he muttered; and then filling his pipe for the tenth time that morning, and pulling his black slouch hat further down over his eyes, he sat down before a rusty and dilapidated typewriter and laboriously began to pound out a letter. He had, after much facial contortion, finished but the third line of the epistle when the door opened and the lawyer, turning in his chair, beheld the thin, anemic countenance of Algernon Hall.

"Well I'll be hanged if you ain't the very fellow I want to see!" exclaimed the lawyer. "I was just writing you a letter. I didn't know you was in town."

"The committee meeting last night adjourned so late," said Hall, "that Kennedy and I stayed at the hotel instead of going back to the ranch."

"Sit down," requested Forbes, pointing to the least rickety of the office chairs.

Hall abstractedly took the chair that Forbes indicated and then stared in preoccupied silence at the flimsy façade of the Maverick saloon which could be seen through the narrow window that faced upon the street.

"What's on your mind, Hall?" asked the lawyer.

It was several minutes before the visitor made reply, and then he turned to the lawyer with an abrupt: "Mr. Forbes, I want to ask you if there is anything in the statutes of this state prohibiting the marriage of cousins?"

"Oh, that's it, is it!" ejaculated the lawyer, and a shrewd smile slowly overspread his weazened features.

"Remember," admonished Hall testily, "that I pay for any advice I may seek."

"In Wyoming," chuckled Forbes, "a fellow can marry his cousin,—or a grizzly bear if he wants to."

"Very well," said the young man, reaching for his hat. "I may have need of your services again shortly; if not, send in your bill."

"But I might also inform you," added the lawyer, "that in this state a woman's property is her own. Yes," he grinned, "under the absurd laws of our glorious commonwealth you got to choke 'em to get the money."

"That doesn't interest me," coldly observed the client.

"I'll bet it does," laughed Forbes. "But as you are so touchy on the subject, I won't argue it with you."

"When I need counsel I will ask for it," returned Hall stiffly, rising from his seat. "I bid you good morning."

"Wait a minute, I have something important to tell you."

There was something compelling in the lawyer's tone and reluctantly Hall sat down again.

"Yes, it's something that concerns you very much," began Forbes.

"So you have twice remarked," put in Hall sharply, for he felt instinctively that he was to hear something unpleasant.

"Yes, it concerns you very, very much," reiterated Forbes, lacing his fingers together and looking ponderously wise, "and——"

"And the point is what?" interrupted Hall.

"The point is that your uncle left a will," snapped the lawyer.

"Left a will!" ejaculated Hall.

The other nodded.

Hall sank back in his chair dazed.

"Why is it you didn't speak to me about it before?" he finally demanded. "I have been here several days. Why is it?"

"Well," replied Forbes, slowly, "I wanted to get a little better acquainted with you first—I wanted

to find out what kind of a party you was, and I didn't have an opportunity till last night."

"I'm sure I don't see what the intimacy of our acquaintance has to do with it."

"It's got a lot to do with it," declared the lawyer. "After last night I figure you as a—a practical kind of a fellow,—not much sentiment or foolishness—and I thought maybe you'd like to talk it over with me, being as it concerns you materially."

Suddenly a great light seemed to break upon the client. "'Concerns me so materially,'" he repeated. "Does the will name me as sole legatee?" he demanded, and he leaned forth eagerly in his chair.

Forbes gazed at him steadily for a moment before answering the question upon which so much depended, a cynical smile overspreading his wrinkled face.

"On the contrary," he replied deliberately, "you get just one big, round, silver dollar, and your cousin, Miss Sawyer, gets the balance—the residue you might say."

For an instant Hall seemed dazed and then he lurched forward on the table with a groan. "This is awful—awful!"

There was a momentary look of triumph on the lawyer's face, and then he laughed contemptuously.

"You are a pretty hard loser, ain't you," he re-

marked. "Why, every day I see fellows lose their last cent at roulette or faro, and when they walk out the door they don't know where they are going to get their next meal—and they don't as much at bat an eye over it. Shucks, man!" he exclaimed disgustedly, "they tell me you're rich!"

"It's a loss I can ill afford," complained the young man dismally. "Do you know what this will means to me?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

"It means that I lose a half million."

"That much?" inquired the lawyer eagerly.

"Yes, all of it—and more. The estate was worth over a million."

"That's an awful lot of money," mused Forbes thoughtfully. "Yes, a fellow could do a heap with a half million dollars, a half a million big, round, dollars—it's a powerful lot of money."

The thought seemed to madden Hall and he sprang to his feet in a frenzy.

"It's a fraud!" he cried. "It's a plot to rob me! I'll contest it to the last ditch! The will is fraudulent!"

"Well," retorted Forbes coolly, "we will probate it and see."

"Probate it?" shrieked Hall. "Hasn't it been probated yet?"

"No, it hasn't. That's what I wanted to see you about," and then Forbes turning savagely upon the

excited man, snarled. "Sit down and shut up, you fool. Have some sense!"

The disinherited nephew sank exhaustedly into his seat and the lawyer hitched his chair closer and lowered his voice impressively.

"The day is not entirely lost," he said, and there was something in his tone that inspired Hall with a sudden hope.

"What do you mean?" he demanded breathlessly.

Forbes knew that he was making a bold move and a dangerous one; but when he saw the glitter of avarice that came into the eyes of the other; saw the features suddenly contorted with the passion of greed; he was satisfied and he hesitated no longer.

"I mean," he whispered, "that no one knows of this will but myself. *Now suppose it should disappear.*"

Hall comprehended instantly.

"Good! good!" he exclaimed feverishly. "Yes, of course, the will must disappear."

"I thought you'd like my idea," remarked Forbes dryly.

"But," suddenly inquired Hall, "was not the will witnessed?"

"Yes, of course it was witnessed," replied the lawyer, with some heat. "I drew it, and I know how to draw a will that will stand, too. It was witnessed by Nate Champion, who is on the black-

list; and by Bud Bradley, who has been drunk for five years to my certain knowledge. I haven't the slightest doubt that either of those fellows had an idea what they were signing. It might have been their death-warrant, for all they knew—and maybe it was," he added significantly.

Hall listened impatiently.

"Let's see the will," he said eagerly. "Have you it here?"

"Sure I have," replied Forbes. "Here is a copy—you may read it."

Rapidly Hall scanned the instrument, and his legal mind told him that it was as Forbes had said—the will would hold. After several times reading the paragraph concerning his legacy of one dollar, he handed the copy back.

"You have the original here, you say?" he inquired tremulously.

"Yes."

"Well, then, let's destroy it—and all copies too," he added hastily.

"Yes, let's destroy it," mimicked Forbes with a sneering laugh. "But *before* we destroy it, let's talk over what's in it for yours truly. I quit practising law for my health several years ago."

Hall squirmed in his chair uneasily.

"What do you think is fair?" he asked. "The estate consists of some barren land and some cattle which are depreciating in value."

The lawyer could hardly restrain himself; yet with an effort at calmness he filled his pipe, lit it, tipped his chair back against the wall, and regarded Hall as composedly as his anger would allow.

"Mr. Hall," he began, "my dear Mr. Hall, you are such an almighty damn fool that I don't know what to say to you. Why, man," he exclaimed disgustedly, "it has been less than five minutes ago since you voluntarily told me that the estate was worth over a million!"

"I was excited, Mr. Forbes, truly I was. My loss was not a half million or anything like it. A hundred thousand would more than cover it."

"That's all a lie!" roared Forbes. "Don't you think *I* know what the estate is worth?" Wasn't I old Sawyer's lawyer for twenty years? I know more about the estate than you do! It was worth over a million."

"Well, let us not quarrel," and there was a pitiful attempt at suavity in Hall's voice, which however failed miserably in its purpose. "Tell me how much you want—and please be reasonable."

"You name a figure and I'll tell you if it is right," returned Forbes gruffly.

"Well, suppose we say a thousand dollars."

"A thousand devils!" exclaimed the lawyer furiously. "Lord, but you are liberal! You've never been taken for Coal Oil Johnny, have you? Now listen to me, Hall: I might as well tell you

that I'm going to get rich off of you. The law business ain't no mint out in this country—in fact this is the first good opportunity I've had for many a day, and I haven't overlooked many bets neither. Now I tell you, my young innocent friend, you just multiply that thousand by a hundred and you'll come nearer the mark."

"A hundred thousand dollars?" gasped Hall.

"Not a cent less."

The enormity of the sum demanded seemed to stun Hall and for several minutes he stared helplessly into the lawyer's countenance, but the face that he saw was as rapacious as his own.

"What assurance have I that your will is genuine?" he finally asked.

"I have already suggested that you might probate it."

Hall shrugged his shoulders: plainly the idea was distasteful.

"Or," continued Forbes, "you might ask the witnesses if they subscribed their names to old man Sawyer's will in this office, on the third day of last January."

Hall remained silent, but his brain was active. Was it a plot to extort money from him? Was the will authentic, or was it a forgery? If it was authentic would Forbes take less than the exorbitant sum that he had demanded? If it was a forgery would he dare produce it for probate?

These questions he asked himself many times, but none of them could he answer. There was one thing, however, of which he felt pessimistically assured, and that was that he would have small chance of successfully contesting the will in any case, for where women were concerned the western courts were notoriously chivalrous.

"You are familiar with the old man's writing, are you not?" inquired Forbes.

"Yes."

"Well," said the lawyer," I have a letter that will dispel any lingering doubts that you may have A few days after the old man made his will he came up here and wrote a long communication to his niece, leaving it for me to mail. After he left, I, as his attorney and counselor of course, read the letter and, luckily for you, I concluded it would be best not to mail it, so I kept it. You will see that it is a long rambling letter that contains much family history that I could not have possibly found out, and it also informs your cousin that she has been made sole legatee of the estate."

He opened a drawer in his desk, drew forth a letter and tossed it on the table. "There, read it yourself."

Hall seized the letter eagerly. First he glanced through it hurriedly, then he read it again slowly and carefully, and then after a long scrutiny of the signature he laid it upon the table with a sigh.

"It's all true," he said sadly. "I am convinced."

"Well, then," said Forbes, with a show of impatience, "let's close the deal."

"Now, Mr. Forbes," protested Hall, "I want you to be generous with me. We are both lawyers and there should not only be a professional courtesy, but a fraternal spirit in this matter."

"Like the devil!" snorted Forbes.

"But, my dear sir," persisted Hall, "while I appreciate your great kindness in withholding this document, I sincerely trust that you will not turn it too much to your personal advantage."

"Well, Hall, I'll be easy on you. Give me two thousand in cash now, and a bill of sale for three thousand four-year-old beef cattle, and I'll call it square. You can deliver the cattle after the next beef round-up, by which time you will have possession of the estate, and you can date that bill of sale next fall, say September, first."

"Is that the very best you can do?" pleaded the young man.

"The very best and I think I have been more than generous."

Thus the matter was arranged. Hall gave his check for two thousand, also a bill of sale for the cattle. Forbes then produced the will, and Hall, after comparing it with the copy and examining the signatures of the principal and the witnesses, crushed all the papers into a shapeless mass and

applied the match. The conspirators watched the blaze that turned the fortune of Helen Sawyer into blackened ashes, and then Hall, with more cheerfulness than he had shown that day, took his hat and departed.

As the door closed the lawyer threw his old slouch hat on the table. "Hurrah for Bill Forbes!" he cried aloud. I knew it would come some day." He chuckled softly as he placed the check in his wallet. "A pretty good day's business. But, Lord, how that fellow did hate to divide! But I knew the will would fetch him, and it did—the fool!"

He was just closing his desk when the door opened and the young man re-entered the room.

"Hello, did you forget something?" queried the lawyer.

"Yes," returned Hall, "I did forget something —or rather I thought of something. I have paid you a very generous fee, haven't I?"

"Only fair, only fair," replied Forbes cautiously.

"It should at least entitle me to your services in regard to the settlement of the estate."

"Services? Why, there's nothing to do. The estate don't owe a dollar and there is nothing to do but for you and your cousin to whack it up between you."

"There," put in Hall eagerly, "that's the point —'whacking it up,' as you term it. Why should I whack it up? Listen," and he laid his hand earnestly

upon the other's shoulder: *"Why can't we make a new will in which I will be made sole legatee?"*

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Forbes. "Won't you leave the girl anything?"

"Why should I?" demanded Hall irritably. "And anyhow I can't afford it after dividing with you. I'm out now a hundred thousand or more."

"Well, I *will* be damned!" reiterated the lawyer. "In all my experience you beat anything that——"

"The girl has no use for money," interrupted Hall argumentatively. "She has been a school-teacher, contented and interested in her work—she will never feel the loss."

"If she hasn't lost her position as school-teacher, you ought to get that too," suggested Forbes ironically. "While you are at it you might as well trim her right."

Hall had no sense of humor, so to this suggestion he paid no attention.

"Your idea is practical though," admitted Forbes, after a few minutes' thought, "but before we go into it any further, I want to know what there is in it for number one—for me, myself, personally."

"Merciful heavens! Haven't you got enough?"

"It don't look like either of us has enough," retorted the other coolly.

"How much more do you want?" inquired Hall uneasily.

"Well, I'll say two thousand more four-year-olds."

In vain Hall pleaded, argued and protested; the lawyer was adamant.

"Take it or leave it!" exclaimed Forbes at last. "And do it quick for I am tired of listening to you."

Hall hesitated. The very thought of giving up more money nauseated him; but to abandon the other half of the estate when it was so easily within his grasp—uh! that was even worse. And so in the end he capitulated.

"I'll draw up the new will all right," agreed the lawyer; "but I will leave it to you to forge the signatures. I am going to be just a leetle bit careful—and you can discover the thing out to the ranch too," he added. "It's getting a little bit late to discover one down here."

"How about signatures?"

"You can find lots of papers at the ranch bearing the old man's signature, and I will furnish you copies of Champion's and Bradley's signatures that I can get over to the land office."

"Very well," acquiesced Hall. "But when will it be fixed up?"

"Come in to-morrow and I will have everything ready for you."

"I'll see you, then, to-morrow afternoon," said Hall rising to his feet.

"I don't suppose you are so agitated about our marriage laws as you was, are you?" and Forbes grinned knowingly.

"I had determined to marry the young lady," replied Hall boldly, "and I can't say that I have changed my mind—I may and I may not."

"Well you'll stand a durn-sight better chance of getting her now, than you would before she was trimmed out of all that money," laughed the lawyer, "because I might have taken a shine to her myself."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHOW-DOWN.

WHEN Thorpe awoke the next morning, he was alone. For some time he lay and luxuriously waited for the summons to breakfast but no sound came from the kitchen. Then he noticed the two untidy bunks, and he wondered at this, for it was the invariable practice of the men to put their beds in order the first thing upon arising. "Nat! *O, Nate!*" he called. There was no response. Somewhat alarmed he got out of bed and walked into the other room—and then he knew. The coffee-pot was on the stove and there was food on the table, but three unwashed plates told only too truly of the hasty departure of the men.

Bitterly had he regretted his impetuous accusation of Tom Horn. Abandoning the prosecution he had rallied to the defense, and for hours and late into the night he had argued upon the frailness of the evidence and upon the possibility of mistake. Every plea of the court-room he had used, but his eloquence was fruitless, for the three men remained silent, grim and determined.

Sadly he dressed himself, and then for a long

while he sat upon the edge of the bunk and stared at the floor. He felt that a tragedy was to mar the very outset of his new life; and the thought that he alone was to blame, embittered him and his roseate hopes gave way to gloom and depression.

"I must do something!" he exclaimed at last. And then with a sudden determination he hastily gulped a cup of coffee, saddled a horse, and set out in a long lope for town.

As he rode he tried to formulate some plan of action. The problem was a difficult one; he could not warn Horn of his danger, for that would be traitorous, and it would put the lives of his men in jeopardy; he could not restrain the men from violence—he had tried that. After pondering over the situation for some miles he decided to see Horn and talk with him, and upon the result of a searching questioning which he purposed giving him, to base further action—to warn him if he deemed him innocent; to leave him to his fate if he believed him guilty.

Ride as he did, it was nearly noon when he rode into the Tin Front and threw the reins to a waiting hostler. Walking into the office he found Uncle Billy somewhat boredly listening to Doc Richards' dissertation on the relative merits of the various brands of condensed milk. An anxious inquiry developed the fact that neither of these worthies had seen the missing trio.

"Now there's the Sunflower brand," resumed Richards; "it's made out of axle grease and hair oil and—," but his faithful auditor noticing the anxiety upon the young man's face abandoned the discussion without ceremony.

"We'll go with you and help you find 'em," he volunteered quietly.

"Well, hurry," returned Thorpe; "it's a serious matter."

The proprietor of the Tin Front, though somewhat annoyed at the interruption, joined them, and as they walked down the street he summarized his argument into a list of the fifteen different kinds of lacteal fluid, arranging them in the exact order of their respective worth.

A search of the hotel revealed nothing, as did that of the various saloons and stores along the main street. They stood on the street corner while Uncle Billy made inquiry of his various acquaintances that happened along.

Suddenly Doc Richards exclaimed, "Here they come! I'd recognize that buckskin of Nate's a mile off."

Coming towards them rode three men. The horses were in a slow walk, and their riders were scrutinizing the sidewalks as though looking for some one. Nate Champion rode in the lead, and Thorpe could not but admire the centaur-like grace of the tall cowboy, whose every movement seemed

to be a part of the undulating motion of the horse. Leaning slightly forward in the saddle rode Champion, his left hand, palm uppermost, holding the reins; his right hand resting easily at his side. As he came abreast Thorpe noticed a faint, wan smile upon the man's lips, and in glaring contrast to this that his eyes blazed with a suppressed excitement.

"Nate!"

Champion started quickly, then recognizing his employer, he shook his head, put spurs to his horse, and accompanied by his companions disappeared down the street in a cloud of dust.

Thorpe sighed hopelessly. "Too bad, too bad," he muttered. Then turning to his companions he demanded, "Now what shall we do?"

The Sage of the Tin Front spat irresolutely upon the ground, but his colleague was equal to the emergency. "Let's get a drink," he replied promptly. Which advice being deemed by long western usage to be an infallible remedy for indecision, they adjourned to the Capitol bar.

"Did you notice that look on Nate's face?" inquired Uncle Billy, as they seated themselves at a table in the rear of the room. "Well," he continued, not waiting for a reply, "when you see that kinda sad, sweet smile on Nate's face, you want to look out. I've seen it before. While he's got a look of seraphic innocence, as the poet says, on his face, he's just a seethin' volcano inside and

he's more dangerous than seven million rattlesnakes. The only thing that Nate is afeard of, is that he won't get them he's a lookin' for, which same is trouble and plenty of it."

Thorpe nodded resignedly to this, for he knew that the old man was right.

"I knowed an awful nice feller onct," continued the old man, "down in Tombstone. He owned the Lucky Star—I reckon you've all heard of his place. Well, this feller was the most peculiar cuss you ever see. Silent Steve was what most folks called him, 'cept to his face when they calls him Mr. Scott. He sure was, as Mr. Knox says, a eccentric genius; liberal to a fault he was—he'd put his hand in his pocket for you if he never see you before. I've knowed him to stake fellers for two or three years, straight hand runnin'. Money was nothin' to him—or trouble neither.

"He was liberal and square and he had his good points, but of course like most of us he had a pore one too—he used to get bad every onct in a while. As I say, he was a silent kind of a feller—I reckon he didn't speak three words a day, even when the play was goin' heavy agin the bank and some tinhorn would ast him to take the limit off of case-cards. Now every three or four months Steve would get one of his spells; he'd get silenter and silenter, and finally just to noddin'—kinda blue-like and melancholy, no reason apparent, neither. After a few

days of this Steve would show up with a kind of a sad smile on his face and then everybody in Tombstone would go to the woods, as the sayin' is. Before the day was over Steve would shoot somebody, and then he'd turn just that happy and gay it would astonish you—it seemed to relieve him—it took the bile off his stomach, so as to speak.

"Steve started out on Injuns and Greasers first—not wantin' to do no harm—but afterwhile it looked like shootin' that kind of stuff didn't do him no good. He tried killin' two or three of 'em at a time; but it wasn't no use—his appetite was gettin' educated and rough fodder didn't seem to satisfy him. I remember the first white man that Steve got. He was a low-down cuss named Johnson. Now this Johnson party used to hang around the place snatchin' sleepers and playin' what chips he could find on the floor, and of course we was all glad to get shed of him; *but* we all begins to get kinda nervous, too, for we didn't know where Steve's ambition, or whim, or fad, or whatever you want to call it would leave off. Steve was square though: he gave Johnson the gaudiest funeral ever seen in Cochise county. It was sure fine! First was the band from the honkatonk leading the way, playin' 'Hot Time'; then comes the remains wearin' the finest wooden overcoat that could be bought in Phoenix; then comes the two off-shifts from the Lucky Star as chief mourners; then citizens

afoot, hossback, and otherwise; and bringin' up the rear, like a calliope in a circus parade I seen onct in Denver, was Steve in a open hack, all by himself and just that happy and cheerful as could be.

"The next party to fall a victim of Steve's blues was a sheepman named Drury. Now there wasn't no real harm in killin' a sheepman, but then——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Thorpe suddenly, "but isn't that Tom Horn at the end of the bar?"

"Yes, that's him—that little feller."

Thorpe abruptly rose from his chair and walked to the end of the bar where a man leaned against the rail and moodily gazed into the glass of whisky before him.

"This is Tom Horn, isn't it?" he inquired, at the same time touching the man on the shoulder.

The cowboy wheeled about, his right hand at the same time shooting with lightning quickness to his side. He scowled at Thorpe for a moment, and then a vicious smile broke over his hard features; he replaced his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest and leaned lazily back against the bar with an affectation of scornful indifference. Secretly he was astonished at Thorpe's temerity, for after the episode in the dance-hall he believed that the Easterner would flee the country. Slowly the smile faded away and he stared into the young man's face with a sullen malevolence that bespoke his enmity plainer than if he had uttered it.

"Yes, that's my name. What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you privately," replied Thorpe earnestly.

"I reckon you want to square yourself after the other night at the dance-hall," sneered the cowboy. "Well, you can't do it. I'm going to—" he checked himself.

"No, no. It isn't that," returned Thorpe. "It's something more important. I must talk to you about it alone—it is for your own good," he insisted.

Horn's white eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Anything you got to say to me, you can say right here," he snapped.

"Very well, if you will have it that way. I want to know," and Thorpe lowered his voice almost to a whisper, "where you were at four o'clock Tuesday afternoon?"

The effect was electrical. The man stood aggressively erect, his face livid with a sudden anger.

"What is that to you?" he demanded furiously. "You damn——"

The denunciation died away on his lips and Thorpe saw the murderous eyes shift to some one behind him, at the same the young man was seized by a powerful arm and pulled violently aside. Wrathfully he looked to see who his assailant was, and turning suddenly about, he stared into the features of Nick Ray.

"Git out of the way," whispered Ray. "You tryin' to get your head shot off?"

Like one in a dream he saw a man step into his place in front of the enraged Horn, and then he recognized the stalwart form of Nate Champion.

The barroom had its usual afternoon crowd, drinking, talking, gambling, and enjoying themselves their own peculiar way, and many attracted by Thorpe's serious face had stopped to listen; but now as Champion's vengeful figure towered over the cowboy there was an instant of deathly silence and then a rout. Both front and back doors were taxed to their utmost capacity to accommodate the crowd. Under the billiard table, always a haven of refuge on such occasions, there was a waving sea of arms and legs and men cursed and fought as they clamored for room beneath. The dealers, faithful to their trust, remained to guard the bank-roll, but the players, most of whom grabbing their chips, fled precipitously.

"Copper the Queen for me, Mack," yelled one player, as he joined the stampede for the door. "I've thought of another place to go."

Thorpe looked at Uncle Billy and Doc Richards, who, apparently paralyzed by an overpowering sense of their peril, remained seated at the table. He was dazed at the rapid succession of events and he sank down into his chair beside them.

"What does it all mean?" he inquired bewilderedly.

To this there was no reply, for both Richards and Uncle Billy were staring with protruding eyes at the two men in front of the bar.

Horn slouched back against the bar carelessly, almost indolently, his arms stretched at right angles to his slim figure along the rail, and a boot-heel negligently hooked itself across the foot-rest. Every muscle of his wiry frame was relaxed and he looked the man at ease; his face assumed an expression of mild surprise at the action of the crowd, but his rapidly shifting eyes belied the thought. It was not bravado, this manner of Horn's—it was a sparring for time, for with characteristic treachery he believed himself trapped by the two men, and that only a timely interference by some of his friends could save him.

Nick Ray, as though he had read the man's thoughts, unbuckled his belt, and then winding it about the revolver in the holster tossed it into the corner, at which Horn gave a great sigh of relief and Champion nodded approvingly, although he did not take his eyes from the man who stood before him for a minute.

"So it ain't nobody's business where you was Tuesday, eh? Well, it's my business!" The words came sharp and incisive, and there was a look of

deadly earnestness on Champion's face that brooked no evasion.

Horn's boot-heel came slowly down from the foot-rail.

"What are you talkin' about?" he asked huskily.

"*You* know what I'm talkin' about," retorted Champion savagely. "I ask you ag'in where you was Tuesday 'bout four o'clock?"

"I was out to the ranch."

"What time that afternoon did you git to town?"

"Before six o'clock—I can prove it."

"You can prove it, can you! That's what I thought. You have been fixin' up your proofs. "There's one man that tells you didn't git here till six."

"He's a liar," vociferated Horn. "I'll git him for that. Where's he gone to?" and he stepped forward eager to quarrel with the less dangerous Easterner, but Champion blocked his path.

"Wait a minute," he commanded harshly. "You are talkin' to *me* now. If you want to git anybody, why, git *me*. *I'm* your meat."

It was the challenge. There was a breathless silence in the room and even the sibilant whispering of the excited spectators suddenly ceased. All eyes were upon Horn. The veins in the man's neck swelled and his face became suffused with an evil glow as his heart tempestuously pumped the blood

through its throbbing channels—but the affront passed unheeded.

"Well?" Champion's voice rang out with an ominous clearness.

"I ain't got nothin' ag'in you," growled Horn doggedly.

"No, I reckon not," sneered Champion; "but I have ag'in you."

For a few moments Horn made no reply. He realized that at last he had been found out, and that there was no escape. Suddenly his thin lips hardened with purpose and his hand slowly and cautiously edged downward towards his belt, like a panther who must sneak and skulk within striking distance before making the final spring. He had calculated the distance to a nicety. Four inches below his supple fingers, protruding like some great white fang, was the ivory handle of a six-shooter. It was truly said that Tom Horn was the quickest man on the draw in all Wyoming; and now that he had approached his weapon so closely a great wave of confidence returned to him. Nevertheless his face was drawn with a fearful anxiety and he earnestly hoped for a back-down before Champion put him to the final test. He looked warily around, there was no escape—the question must be asked.

"What have you got ag'in me?"

"What I have got ag'in you," replied Champion

in a low tense voice, "is that you killed Ranger Sto——"

Horn's eyes suddenly blazed in a wild fury. With a lightning-like movement he snatched at his weapon—and for the first time in his life he fumbled. Rain and sun had conspired to harden the leather of his holster and for an instant it clung tenaciously to the weapon. It was only the infinitesimal part of a second, this grip of leather, but it might as well have been a day. Like, a great flash of blue flame, Champion's big four-pound Colt's .45 leaped from its holster, well greased for the occasion, and the seven-inch barrel was thrust into the pit of Horn's stomach with an audible thud. Horn's hands went up even as his weapon was falling to the floor.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he whined.

"No, I reckon not," exclaimed Champion breathlessly. "Just started to wind your watch, I guess. You white-eyed skunk, I orter pull trigger on you," and Champion removed his thumb from the hammer for an instant and Tom Horn's life trembled in the balance. "If I was only sure, dead sure, that you killed Ranger Stone, I'd blow a hole through you that you could throw a dog through."

"I didn't, I didn't," protested Horn, "I didn't."

"They talk about you bein' a gun-artist," scoffed Champion. "Why you couldn't draw a ham out of a gunny sack in a day's time."

Horn held his tongue; he was thoroughly cowed.

"Here, I'll give you another chance," and Nate replaced his weapon in his belt. "Now we can both draw together, if you are game; or we can go outside and shoot it out."

But the man's nerve was all gone.

"I don't want to. I ain't got nothin' ag'in you."

"Look here, Horn: Right now you are figurin' on shootin' me in the back and I orter kill you; but I never was much on shootin' chicken-hearted prairie-dogs like you, and I'll give you a chanct. I'll give you five minutes to get out of town and out of the country. Remember the next time I see you I am goin' to shoot you same as a mad dog. Now git!"

The wretched man got. Life was dear to him and he welcomed escape at any price. As he passed through the door his progress was accelerated by a tremendous kick administered by the heavy boot of one Nick Ray.

Champion sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands—it was the reaction.

"Oh why didn't I kill him? Why didn't I? Why didn't I? He'll ambush me! I know he will! I *will* kill him," and Champion rushed out into the street pistol in hand. But Tom Horn was gone.

"Say, Nick," remarked Thorpe, laying his hand admiringly upon Ray's broad shoulder, "you would have made a swell fullback."

CHAPTER XII.

THORPE HAS A CALLER.

ALTHOUGH the morning was well advanced John Thorpe, ranch-owner and cattleman, sat upon the stoop at the front of the house still clad in his pajamas. The rigors of winter had passed and already a warm spring breeze, unsullied by the smoke and grime of civilization, was greening the ranges and scattering the few remaining dead leaves upon the alder trees as though to be off with the old love and on with the new. The domain the the young man surveyed was his; the scattered herd of cattle that grazed along the creek bottom, bore his brand; the horses in the corrals were his chattels; every desirable thing within the scope of his vision he accounted his very own.

It is a satisfying feeling, this ownership of the soil, and as Thorpe gazed over the blackened bowl of his favorite briar at the valley shimmering in the bright morning sunshine, he fervently thanked the kind destiny that had directed his uncertain footsteps to the West, and he could not repress a great sigh of content.

The highway which connected the town with

the outside world twined its interminable length through the valley, disappearing abruptly over the crest of one hill to be seen again upon the slope of the next, each time diminishing, apparently, in width until it lost itself in a point upon the horizon. The traffic of all north-central Wyoming passed over this thoroughfare; once each day the stage coach trotted briskly by, reeling off its seven miles an hour at the expense of much good horse-flesh; freighters, with their ten and twelve horse teams labored slowly past to the jingling accompaniment of the leader's bells; thousands of cattle, after the fall round-up, trecked over the long road destined for the shambles that awaited them in the cities of the East; cowpunchers galloped their horses in joyous impatience for a week's lark in town, and afterwards trotted somberly back to their lonesome work on the range.

Had any one, a month before, told Thorpe that the spectacle of a traveler passing along a country road was to be a matter of entertainment to him, he would have scoffed and derided the idea; nevertheless when, upon this bright morning, a solitary equestrian appeared over the brow of a distant hill, he watched with a lazy interest not unmixed with curiosity.

For a quarter of an hour he speculated upon the identity and probable destination of the approaching figure, and then with an idle man's unselfishness

he summoned another to share with him this delectable sight.

"Nick, Nick," he called, "there is some one coming along the big road."

Ray, who had been engaged in mending some harness, appeared in the doorway and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"There sure is," agreed the cowpuncher, and then after a long scrutiny he suddenly exclaimed, "and I'll be dogged if I don't believe it's a woman."

"A woman?" ejaculated Thorpe, and the young man jumped to his feet and gazed intently at the approaching figure.

"Good Lord!" cried Ray apprehensively, "she's turned off the big road and is comin' in *here!*"

"Get my field-glasses, Nick," ordered Thorpe hastily, "they are in there hanging by the fireplace."

Ray quickly produced the glasses and Thorpe feverishly unstrapped the leather case. Never had he found the lenses so difficult to adjust, not barring that time at Sheepshead when he so nearly won a tremendous lot of money—and would have won it only for the fact that his horse was beaten by nine others.

"By the gods, Nate!" he exclaimed, after a hasty glance, "it's Miss Sawyer." Hurry and get those dirty dishes out of sight. Make up those beds a little better. Hurry! Hustle! Jump!"

They dived through the door like a couple of

prairie-dogs and for the five minutes the JT ranch-house was a hive of industry. Ray was a demon of energy; he kicked out the dogs, shoved saddles under bunks, put wood on the fire, cleaned the windows with an old hat, and, in his excitement, put on Thorpe's only necktie.

"Nick!" came from the back room, "where the devil is my tie?"

"I don't know," answered that flustered individual. "Did you look in the corral?"

Steps were heard upon the porch and after many wild gesticulations and threats upon the part of the ranch-owner, poor Nick rushed out hysterically to welcome the guest.

"Howdy, howdy," he vociferated, extending his broad palm. Then believing that his greeting lacked warmth, he added, "I'm damned glad to see ye!" He was immediately struck with the profaneness of this, so he played his last card: "Welcome to our city." He had once heard the mayor of Buffalo so greet a visiting statesman, and he was much impressed with the cleverness of the salutation. Suddenly realizing that as there was no city to welcome the young lady to and that this last greeting must have sounded insane, he blushed a vivid crimson, confusion overcame him, and he retreated backward, thereby falling off the porch, a distance of some four or five feet.

The girl with difficulty repressed a smile.

"Where is Mr. Thorpe?" she inquired.

From the ground at the side of the stoop came guttural noises.

"Whoa! whoa! You damned fool, you're locoed!" exclaimed the bashful man angrily at himself as he rose to his feet. Then aloud, "Who? Him? Johnny? Why, he ain't got up yet."

"Hasn't gotten up yet? Why, it must be after ten o'clock."

"Yes'm, yes'm," reached Thorpe's astonished ears, "but he's from New York and you know it ain't fashionable to git up there before three or four o'clock. Why, if his folks would ever find out that he got up earlier out here——"

"How do you do?" and Thorpe rushed out of the house, both hands extended in a welcome that was as hearty as it was sincere. "What was that rubbish that Nick was telling you?" and he glowered at that hapless individual who was perspiring freely, although the day was not excessively warm.

"I gotta look after a sick hoss," declared Nick hastily.

"Before you go, Mr. Ray," said Thorpe coldly, "will you kindly give me my neck-tie."

Nick mumbled, gasped, and choked, but made no intelligible reply.

"You have it on," said Thorpe sharply.

Nick's hand shot to his throat. "Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated. "Excuse me, Miss," he

apologized hastily, "excuse me," and then he tore off the accusing tie, handed it to his employer, and fled.

For a moment the young man was embarrassed and then he laughed.

"It is apparent to the most undiscerning," he said, "that lady callers are infrequent at the J T ranch."

"At any rate," she returned with a smile, "they cannot doubt the genuineness of their welcome. But I fear," she added gravely, "that I am doing something very unconventional in making this call."

"There are no conventions in Wyoming," laughed Thorpe.

"I felt as though I must see you and apologize for my cousin's rudeness. It—it was awful!"

"Oh, not at all," broke in Thorpe, with a depreciatory wave of his hand. "It amounted to nothing, I assure you."

She had followed him into the house where a fire was burning cheerily upon the hearth.

"Why, how cosy!" she exclaimed, as she glanced around the room.

"It's rather comfortable," he admitted modestly.

Then he saw the girl's eye fall upon Nick's art collection pasted upon the wall, and he swore under his breath, for it consisted of some dozen or more pictures of scantily clad and rather beefy beauties taken from the pages of a certain pink-tinted sporting paper.

"I haven't had time to make any changes yet," he exclaimed, and he hastily turned the best chair around with its back to the art display. "Sit down," he said hospitably.

It was a large rocking chair, covered with a bright Navajo blanket and it looked inviting.

"Thank you."

But as the girl seated herself there was a tremendous rattling and grinding noise and she sprang to her feet in alarm. "Gracious! What's that?"

Thorpe jerked the blanket from the chair, and to his horror exposed,—the dishes, unwashed and greasy with bacon gravy.

The visitor's smile broadened into a laugh.

With a muttered imprecation Thorpe removed the dishes to the kitchen.

"You can see," he said, "that I need a new housemaid. But if you will give me a little notice next time, I promise to have everything all ship-shape—although I suppose I will have to have Nick arrested beforehand."

The smile faded from the girl's face and for a time she gazed sadly into the glowing embers on the hearth.

"I fear there will be no next time, Mr. Thorpe," she said quietly, 'and that this will be my first, last and only visit."

"Why!" he exclaimed, "I trust that you are

not going to be that unsociable, now that we are neighbors."

"The truth is, Mr. Thorpe, my stay here will not be as long as I expected. In fact I am going back to Boston in a very few days. But that is not what I came to tell you," she added nervously. "I first wanted to apologize for the reception you receiving at the ranch the other day——"

"But that was nothing—"

"And," she continued, disregarding the interruption, "and I wanted to speak to you confidentially," and she lowered her voice to almost a whisper, "about your own welfare—your own safety."

"About my own safety?" he repeated incredulously.

"Yes, your own safety. You know you told me of the trouble between the large ranch-owners and the settlers."

"Yes."

"Well, I find that the feeling is not only against the settler, or the granger, or the nester, as they call them, but against the small ranch-owners as well—the 'little fellows,' I hear them called. I will not discuss the moral side of the question—the point is, that there has been trouble and there will be more of it. When I heard of the death of Mr. Ranger Stone the other day, and of an attempted killing here in this house, I——"

"Why, who told you about that?" interrupted Thorpe.

"No one told me. I happened to overhear our foreman, Mr. Kennedy, tell my cousin."

"So," thought the young man, "your foreman knows of it. He must have gotten the story from first hands."

"Now, Mr. Thorpe," continued the girl earnestly, "you are not adapted for this kind of life—and besides it's dangerous. There's no telling but that—that something might happen to you."

"I don't know who'd care," retorted Thorpe grimly, "except Uncle Billy and Doc Richards and, of course, Nate and Nick, and a few friends back East. I have no creditors," he added, with an attempt at facetiousness.

"Your two men, Mr. Champion and Mr. Ray, may bring trouble to you, too."

"How?" he asked quickly.

"I don't wish to be an alarmist or a bearer of tales, but I know that they are far from popular with the ranching interests. It's a condition hard to understand and harder to explain. The grievance seems to be that your men are assertive and defiant—they seem to have no tact."

Thorpe laughed. The idea of his two cowpunchers having, or rather of not having, tact, struck him as amusing. He doubted if either of them knew the meaning of the word.

"Tact, Miss Sawyer," he said, "is for diplomats, statesmen and politicians. As long as my men continue to tell the truth and retain their reputations as gun-artists, their lack of tact will never be noticed. Tact! Why, these very same boys call me, their dignified and exalted employer, 'Johnny.' They don't mean a bit of disrespect, and I would not reproach them for the world."

"Will nothing induce you to quit this perilous business?" she asked, returning to the object of her call.

"Nothing," he replied determinedly. "It was only yesterday that I completed the purchase of this ranch, and now it represents everything I have in the world. So you see I could hardly leave if I wanted to."

"I am sorry."

Thorpe saw the soberly thoughtful look upon the girl's face and something told him that her anxiety was more than she cared to admit.

"Don't you think your alarm is a little exaggerated?" he asked, with a smiling reassurance.

"Decidedly not. We live in different atmospheres, Mr. Thorpe. Mine is charged with electricity and the tension is becoming greater every day—almost hourly I can hear mutterings of the impending storm. There will be more trouble—yes, a great deal more trouble."

"I'll live and die on the JT ranch," declared the

young man. And then in a different tone he added, "But I want to thank you for your interest in my welfare—I appreciate it more than I can tell you."

The girl rose to go.

"Wait! Be seated."

There was something compelling in the young man's tone and he spoke as one accustomed to being obeyed. Confusedly she minded him.

"What is this about you going away?" he demanded. "You surely will stay through the summer. I'm selfish in my request—I want to see more of you. Please change your mind. I'll find some way of placating your cousin," he went on earnestly, "and we will have, as Nate says, 'some big doings.' We'll go horseback riding and fishing, and, by George, I'll give a dance! You see you really have a mission to perform here," he added with a sudden inspiration. "You and I have what is lacking in my two cowboys,—tact. We can bring the factions together at my dance. See? We'll have plenty of fiddling and dancing and hand-shaking and a good time generally—old sores healed up and all that sort of thing. Think of the good that it will do!"

The girl sighed hopelessly.

"Your plan is attractive, Mr. Thorpe; but so far as I am concerned it is quite impossible. I had some idea of attempting all those things some few days ago, but events have transpired," and her

lips trembled, "that makes it imperative that I return to Boston—in fact I'm going back to teach."

"Going back to teach?" exclaimed Thorpe. "Why, I thought that you gave up all that sort of thing for good, and that you were going to show all of us how to run the biggest cattle-ranch in all Wyoming!"

"I have no cattle-ranch,—or any interest in one," she returned quietly.

"No cattle-ranch! Have you sold out?"

The girl shook her head.

"Your surprise is only natural," she said. "Like everybody else in the country you heard that I was heir to one half of my uncle's estate. I believed so myself until yesterday. A will, however, has just been found in which my cousin has been named as sole legatee—with the exception of a bequest to me of one dollar. So you see," she added, with a sad smile, "my trip out here has not been entirely fruitless."

"Outrageous!" cried Thorpe. "I can hardly believe it! It's monstrous!"

"Nevertheless it's true. And, moreover, the expense of my trip has been considerable and I must hurry back, and—and you don't know how I hate to return!" she added passionately.

"I know how you feel," he said sympathetically. "I know how I'd feel. It is not altogether the financial loss—it's something else. Why, I couldn't

"THERE IS ANOTHER REASON WHY I WANT YOU TO STAY"

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leave here if my life was at stake. Why? Vanity, pride, stubbornness, or whatever you may call it, would not permit me. I told people, foolishly perhaps, but nevertheless I told them that I was coming out here to stay, and stay I will!" And then with a sudden mercilessness he continued, "No doubt you also, in the excitement of falling into so much wealth told your friends of your good fortune and of your plans. It will be hard to go back and face them—to confess that you were but chasing a rainbow. It will be hard for you to ask for your position back."

Tears were standing in the girl's eyes and Thorpe knew that he had unveiled the truth, and that it hurt. She attempted to speak.

"Wait!" he said, "wait until I am through. It was cruel of me perhaps, but I have told you only the truth. Now as a matter of fact you don't have to go back! The school in Buffalo is to be enlarged and another teacher is to be employed. The game of politics is an open book for me, and I'll land that position for you," he declared, "or, as Nate says, 'I'll go to herding sheep!'"

"So kind in you," she said tremulously, "but I'm afraid it's quite impossible."

For a full minute Thorpe hesitated. "There is another reason," he said, and his voice was low and earnest, "why I want you to stay—it's the oldest reason in the world, and——"

There was something in his tone and manner that caused her to look up at him quickly, and then her woman's intuition told her the other reason.

"Really I must go, Mr. Thorpe," she said hastily, "and if I never see you again," and she gave him her hand, "I will always remember——"

"But you will see me again," he declared, and he grasped the slim white hand in both of his; "you will."

"I'm afraid not," she said, gently disengaging her hand. "Good-bye."

He helped her on her horse, and then standing motionless in his tracks he watched the slim girlish figure until it was lost over the brow of the hill.

With a sigh he turned on his heel and re-entered the house, but the room which a few minutes before had seemed so cosy, so comfortable, seemed empty and cheerless. He flung himself into a seat and for a long time he stared at the empty chair in front of the fireplace. A half hour passed before the spell was broken. "I'm lonesome as hell!" he suddenly ejaculated.

He lit a cigar and tried to smoke, but the cigar although a good one failed to dispel the gloom which had settled upon him and he threw it angrily upon the hearth. He paced the room for a time, and then stopping in front of the chair which the girl had occupied, he touched it reverentially. "John Thorpe, you are a fool!" he exclaimed

angrily. "You are in love—hopelessly in love. And you as poor as a church-mouse!" and then as though to escape from his own accusation he strode to the back door.

"Nick!" he called. "Nick, where are you?"

A head cautiously appeared from behind the corral.

"Has she gone?" inquired Ray hoarsely.

Thorpe nodded, whereupon the cowboy emerged from his place of concealment and warily approached the house.

"You see, Johnny," he explained apologetically, "I ain't much of a hand with wimen, and the next time you see one a-comin', you jes' rope and hog-tie me and drag me back into the stable, and then maybe I won't make such a fool of myself."

Thorpe looked at him searchingly for a moment, and then he smiled sarcastically.

"I was just about to make the same request of you," he remarked enigmatically.

CHAPTER XIII.

HALL PLANS A CRUSADE.

For a week, ever since the committee meeting in town, Hall had been applying his mind to the solution of the "industrial problem," as he termed it, and now at last he felt that his carefully thought-out plan for the elimination of the evil which menaced the WS and other of the big ranches would bear the criticism of his unimaginative foreman, and that evening he determined to broach it.

"Mr. Kennedy, will you please come to my room after supper. I want to talk to you on a matter of great importance."

"All right, Hall. Got anuther one of them eastern notions?" asked Kennedy, and then without waiting for reply or explanation he slouched on into the house.

"Confound the fellow!" exclaimed Hall, and he gazed irritatedly after the disappearing figure. "If I only had him back East, he would take off his hat and he would say '*Mister* Hall'! I'll correct him next time."

It was not the first time that he had promised Kennedy a lecture upon deportment. Many times

he had approached the subject, but only to falter and to turn half-heartedly to safer and less personal topics, for there was something in the grayish-blue eyes of the grim-visaged foreman that always deterred him. And then Dutch Cooper in the course of a long, garrulous monolgue, one day as he was driving Hall back from town, had made a few pointed remarks upon the eccentricities of Mr. Kennedy.

"Yes," said Cooper, "he sure is a curious feller. He ain't got no patience 'tall. When he can't agree with a gent, he jes' out with his six-shooter and bends it over the gent's head—an' that generally ends the argument."

This intolerance of Kennedy's was plainly a thing not to be trifled with.

As Hall stood by the ranch-house door, he unconsciously repeated Cooper's words: "He jes' outs with his six-shooter an' bends it over the gent's head—an' that generally ends the argument." Disgusting! What abominable language they use in the West!" Mechanically he removed his hat, felt the top of his head, and wondered if Kennedy's weapon would ever bend itself over that particular cranium. And then with another chaste imprecation he entered the house and climbed the ladder-like stairs to his room, for, be it known, the WS home ranch-house was a two-storied affair and the most pretentious in all that country.

The outer walls of the house were of heavy logs, better to withstand a visitation of the Sioux, but the interior partitions were of pine boards over which muslin had been tacked and pasted upon this was *wall-paper*. The paper was of rather a bizarre design and one whose garish red, yellow and green figures gave Hall a headache when he looked at it, but nevertheless it had been the pride of old man Sawyer, for he, Dutch Cooper, and two Cheyenne bartenders had spent a week and several hundred dollars in the selection of it.

"Yes, sir," said one of the bartender-members of the art commission, at the time of purchase, "there's art what is art. A feller jes' nacherally can't look at it sober and appreciate it." To which sentiment the other members of the commission gravely assented, for none of them could—or had.

Hall did not have to wait long, for Kennedy in characteristic western fashion bolted his meal and soon his heavy boots were noisily clattering up the uncarpeted stairs. Unceremoniously kicking open the door, Kennedy threw himself into a chair, tilted his sombrero on to the back of his head, lit a cigar, and then placing his boots upon the table almost under Hall's very nose, said, "Well, young feller, say what you got to say."

This attitude of careless, almost scornful, indifference which Kennedy habitually assumed towards his employer was all a part of that astute individ-

ual's carefully considered policy. Shrewd, calculating man that he was, his keen judgment of men had searched the shallow depths of Hall's soul, and after five minutes' acquaintance with that young man he had mastered the vagaries of the vain, pompous intellect, and he realized that his relations with Hall, if they were to be maintained at all, must be on the basis of absolute domination. The heedless tolerance, under which the young man fumed so impotently, was the exterior which Kennedy usually presented, yet there were times when for variety's sake he cast such a baleful eye upon his employer that the bloodless cheeks blanched with fear; and again, upon other occasions Kennedy allowed himself to relapse into his normal good humor—but of this last, experience taught him that he must be sparing, for it induced a patronizing air in Hall which was most abhorrent to the big foreman, and which he was forced to put down by scowls most ominous.

"Say what you got to say," reiterated Kennedy, and from his complacent manner it was evident that the foreman was upon this evening in one of his rare good humors.

With an effort Hall controlled himself. Yet this was not praiseworthy, for on such occasions men like Hall in the presence of men like Kennedy usually control themselves.

"I have at last the solution of the settler problem," solemnly asserted Hall. "And when I ex-

plain it to you, you won't laugh so much at my 'eastern methods.'"

"Injunction or *habeas corpus?*" inquired Kennedy, cynically.

"Rubbish!" exclaimed the young man. "It's neither."

"Well, then, shoot ahead, sonny," said Kennedy, relenting a little. "Shoot ahead—I'll listen."

"First," began Hall, "I'll show you why the present plan will not do: Now in the first place, it is costing us too much—fifteen hundred dollars apiece. In the second place it is too slow, because our operating force is too small—one man. In the third place it is too dangerous—it places us too much in the power of that one man, and——"

"I kin fix him when we git through with him," interrupted Kennedy significantly.

"Yes, I suppose we have all thought of that, but we might not be able to fix him soon enough—not before the whole nasty business leaks out. But there is another reason why I doubt the wisdom of the present plan, even disregarding the reasons I have given, and that is, there is bound to be a reaction. We are living over a powder mine, and it is only a matter of time until they organize against us. We are outnumbered a hundred to one. Suppose they should suspect the truth!"

"We'd be lynched—that's all," remarked Kennedy calmly. "But what else kin we do? *They* got to go,

or *we* got to go—that's sure. We can't buy 'em out, and so we got to put 'em out."

"I have a plan," said Hall earnestly, "which I think you will agree is a good one—it is founded on one of the most rudimentary principles of human nature."

"On which?" inquired Kennedy.

"My plan," explained Hall, "is to get up a crusade—a holy war."

Kennedy looked mystified.

"Have you noticed, Mr. Kennedy, how many, to use a western expression, 'dam fools' there are in this world?"

"I sure have," replied the foreman, looking very hard at the other and grinning. "How kin I help it?"

"Well," continued Hall, not noticing the insinuation, "our campaign here will be fought and won by an organization of damn fools."

"Who is goin' to be Captain?" inquired Kennedy.

"The compensation of a private in the army," went on Hall, "is thirteen dollars a month; and in times of peace when there is no danger, little work and plenty to eat, and when he is to be comfortably housed, warmly clad, well fed, and cared for generally, it is almost impossible to get him to enlist. But only let war be declared and what a difference! Give the same man a chance to be shot and killed, or wounded, or maimed for life, not to speak of disease

and hardships of every imaginable kind, and he fairly begs for the blessed privilege of enlisting. Think of it! Why a man laying bricks gets four or five dollars a day with no more personal danger than that of catching cold. Yet here is the other fellow offering himself as a target for bullets for less than fifty cents a day. Compensation cuts no figure. The explanation? Frankly I don't know—it is inexplicable. Adventure may be it,—or glory,—or fun. I call it to use your western expression again, 'damn foolishness.' Of course," he continued, "the man is a reckless individual; he has a singular idea of fun—he thinks it is the soul of wit to have his head shot off, or to shoot off the other fellow's. Perhaps the best explanation is that strange, unaccountable desire that many people have to champion the wrongs of others—to fight for principle,—to down evil and to espouse virtue, and all that kind of rot. Of one thing we are assured and that is, that if we once convince this fellow that he is battling for right and justice and truth, and such drivel, he will fight with all the fanaticism of a whirling dervish. That's what makes armies—each side is firmly convinced that it alone is right."

"I reckon you're right," agreed Kennedy, with a yawn, "but what's that got to do with these here settlers?"

"Just this," returned Hall, leaning earnestly forward across the table: "we will organize a small

army of the kind of individuals of the kind I have described, and the battle-cry will be: 'Down with the rustlers!'

Slowly Kennedy began to see, and he sat up in his chair and for the first time showed an interest.

"It is not only feasible, but it is intensely practical," pursued Hall. "We will go to some other locality, Arizona, Texas, or New Mexico and organize our army. We will declare that Johnson county is overrun with rustlers, thieves and desperadoes. The newspapers will assert the same thing. We will have meetings of the Cattlemen's Association and pass resolutions, and then, perhaps, have a sinilar resolution put through the Legislature; and then we, representing the wealth and property interests of Johnson county, will call for brave and fearless men to restore law and order."

A reluctant conviction began to manifest itself upon Kennedy's face. It was a part of his policy to agree to none of Hall's ideas or suggestions but now as the young man unfolded his bold scheme, he was forced to admit to himself that the plan had merit.

"I believe there's somethin' to what you say," he conceded.

Little as this begrudging admission was, Hall was flattered; it was almost a compliment.

"Wait until I have explained some of the details,

and then I believe you will cease to scoff at my 'eastern methods.'

"Let us regard for the moment the molding of public opinion—a very important part of the campaign, I assure you. In the East publicity comes high, and we can thank our lucky stars that we are not operating back there, for we would have to have a large staff of press-agents and the papers would hold us up something awful. But out here it is different, for, thank heaven, there are but few papers to reckon with—infact, we need only consider those in Denver and Cheyenne, and while they will require the expenditure of a little money, the eastern papers can be handled with a little clever manipulation without financial outlay. We must not forget, however, that our publicity should be national, for by arousing popular indignation it makes our labor of organization lighter, and it makes a greater justification for any overt acts our army might commit."

"Such as killin' fifty or a hundred rustlers," put in Kennedy, with a knowing wink.

"That's the idea exactly. Now I will get up such an excitement over rustling, outlawry, and deviltry generally, and about the local authorities being unable to cope with the situation, that the entire country will be relieved when the gang is finally wiped out—it will be a case where the respectable element just *had* to take the law into its own hands. I

can see some of the editorials now: Truth, justice and tommyrot prevailing. Virtue triumphant; Evil discomfited in defeat, and Victory perching upon the righteous banners of the invading host.. Why, man, it will be a crusade!"

Kennedy had caught some of Hall's enthusiasm.

"How it would look in print!" he exclaimed. "A description of the Hole-in-the-Wall country—a robbers' roost and the home of a desperate band of outlaws, compared to which Billy-the-Kid's outfit was as mere suckin' babies! How's that?"

"Good!" said Hall. "The eastern papers will print pages of that kind of stuff and call for more. They will take it hook, line, and sinker, for they believe the west is almost entirely populated with thieves, murderers, and cut-throats generally. No copy will be too strong for them."

"What will be the expense?" inquired Kennedy, his ardor cooling somewhat at the thought.

"Well, I should say that we can handle the Denver and Cheyenne papers for three or four thousand. We don't bribe them direct, you understand. We will give bogus rewards for visionary cattle and imaginary cattle thieves,—then so much display advertising,—provided of course, that the paper will print our *reading-notices*. The reading-notice is the milk in the cocoanut—the thing that influences the public mind."

"I'll put down four thousand for the papers," said

Kennedy, pulling out the stub of a lead pencil. "Now what else?"

"To that sum," replied Hall, "we must add the expense of our army, and its organization. As the campaign must necessarily be short, sharp, and conclusive, I should say that we should have at least two hundred men—the more the better. I think that we should be able to secretly organize, equip and transport our force for, say four thousand. As to pay, we will be liberal; instead of thirteen dollars a month, we will pay five dollars a day and expenses, and I suggest a bounty of fifty dollars on each scalp. Our daily expense will be about fifteen hundred dollars, but our undertaking should be finished in four days. Add five thousand for bounties and incidentals and it comes to nineteen thousand."

"Call it an even twenty thousand," commented Kennedy, "and I'll say it's dirt cheap; and so will the rest of the committee. I'll see 'em in the next few days, and I know they will all come in."

"*Now* what do you think of 'eastern methods?'" inquired Hall proudly.

"I will say," confessed Kennedy, "that they seem good,—almost too good. But then when them lies begin to come out in the paper," he said after a minute's thought, "don't you think somebody will get on to what's up?"

"There is only one man in this country who

might understand and who is smart enough to block our game."

"Who's that?" demanded Kennedy.

"John Thorpe."

"Well then," returned Kennedy, with a grim smile, "we'll jest put that gentleman on the list."

CHAPTER XIV.

LETTERS.

It was now the middle of March, and yet no word came for the Spring round-up. Men wondered at this, for usually by this time the State Association had set a time two weeks in advance, and then the cattle were rounded into great herds, from which the calves were unceremoniously roped, dragged to the branding fires, and marked with the time-enduring brand of their owners.

"I don't understand it," said Ray, in talking of the situation with his employer. "I sure don't. I stopped at the WS place yesterday to ask Kennedy about it, he's been round-up captain for the last ten years, but he wasn't there. That there mackerel-eyed, simlin-headed feller, what Dutch Cooper calls 'A. Alfred,' tells me Kennedy has gone down to Cheyenne. And when I gets to town I inquires for Dixon and Martin and Ace Gentry and a lot of them big fellers, thinkin' they'd know, but I can't find none of 'em. Some of the boys tells me that all them fellers went out on the stage Monday mornin' with Kennedy. Maybe they gone down to find out what's the matter."

The delay in fixing the time for this annual inventory, as it might be called, was vexatious, for Thorpe was anxious and impatient to know how his stock had increased. Again the stories of the big outfits having their irons out on the range before the authorized time, gave him some concern, for he could ill-afford to lose even one of the small herd which he fondly hoped was to be the foundation of his fortune. Although not given to worrying, there was a trace of anxiety in Thorpe's manner of late, which his men had noticed and which they did everything to alleviate, for they had become fond of their young employer and to accord him a certain respect, notwithstanding their sometimes rough and always familiar address.

That afternoon Champion arrived with some mail the first Thorpe had received since his arrival.

"I reckon there's more readin' there than you can do in a month," said Nick, tossing the package upon the table.

Untying the string, Thorpe found a newspaper and two letters. Upon one of the envelopes he recognized a club monogram, and he laughed when he read the superscription written in Harper's precise hand: "John T. Thorpe, Esq. Care of the New York Kid." The other letter was enclosed in a square envelope, light blue in color, and that it was delicately perfumed was attested by Nate's red nose,

for he had held it to that organ all the way from town.

Looking at the postmark Thorpe saw that the letter had been mailed from Buffalo. "From Miss Sawyer," he said to himself, and he felt a thrill of pleasure as he contemplated the distinctive feminine writing across the face of the envelope. "Every line and curve shows character," he thought. "It's legible, too. And I'll wager that it contains no affected writing of back page to front in that haphazard style which some girls affect—she's too sensible. However, I'll read Harper's letter first."

NEW YORK, N. Y.

TO THE NEW YORK KID.

DEAR JOHN:

I just received your exciting letter, and I hasten to answer the same so that you may have the pleasure of its perusal, rather than your heirs, executors and administrators. To be sure that it reaches you out in that God-forsaken country where you now live, I have addressed it "Care of the New York Kid," a name which you ingenuously inform me is a "title." I regard it as an epithet. However I will not quarrel with a man as near death as you are—if you have not been killed already. In the name of all the saints why did you get into that fight? You might know that those western desperadoes would like nothing better than

to shoot you full of holes. If suicide is your object why go West? The Brooklyn bridge is doing business at the old stand, and you could use it with less annoyance to your friends. If you have not lost your mind, you have given up the dance-hall woman. If not, what shall we do with your remains? Do you prefer to be buried, cremated or stuffed? I suggest the latter as more fitting to one of your intelligence. As there is said to be vacancy in the Darwinian chain immediately below that of the ape, I believe the Smithsonian Institute would bid high for you.

Seriously, I am alarmed. If it would do any good I would beg of you to come away from that uncivilized country; but knowing as I do, I know that such an appeal would be useless. Had it not been for my apprehension regarding the outcome of the incident, it would have been quite refreshing to read your account, which you so naïvely describe as "not amounting to anything,"—the same being *only* a fight with a *jealous cowboy* who has a reputation for killing people who vex him. Ye gods! words fail me. However, I must confess that I am not greatly surprised for you have the devil's own talent in getting into such scrapes, and I am only comforted by the thought that the Evil One looks after his own. I rather imagine that this last scrape of yours will exert his Satanic majesty's ingenuity to the utmost. However, "nuff sed."

I am glad that you are located and have at last become the "cattle-baron" of your dreams. The description of your environment sounds attractive. If you can find for me, not too far from the shopping district, a nice steam heated ranch, with, of course, hot and cold water, bath, telephone service, and with a nice café with an orchestra attached, why, then I may be tempted to try ranch life, myself. A little of roughing it is said to be a good thing. I note also that you are situated in the heart of the tenderloin belt and adjacent to the venison and prairie-chicken districts, which is well, albeit the haunts of the luscious lobster and the toothsome terrapin are far, far removed. Yet the lack of these few things which seem so material to our comfort, might be endured for the sake of your charmingly democratic society. I infer from your letter it is not necessary to give a million dollar ball or a freak banquet to obtain recognition by your four hundred. No, happily a simpler and less expensive method seems to prevail. All one has to do is to repair to the nearest saloon and pull the nose of the first desperado at hand, whereat society receives you with open arms and bestows upon one an endearing name, such as New York Kid, or Bowie Knife Butch, or Pistol Pete.

Of these delightful features of this Utopia of yours, you write me with enthusiasm, and yet in almost the same breath you complain of "the raw,

primitive severity—the harsh angularity of the people, the country, and everything that lives in it." Have patience, for Time, my son, is a great healer. Time will eradicate the angles, the harshness, and the rawness of even your whisky. Time and those gentle western zephyrs, irreverently called "blizzards" will eventually soften the sharp outlines of your landscapes; a little nourishment now and then might tend to symmetrize your cattle; and as for your angular people, I can think of nothing more effective than a generation or so on Fifth Avenue, where, according to your old night-hawk friend, Boston Bill, "they eat cream puffs all day long, and drink wine all night"—truly a scathing denunciation of the ultra-rich. It may have been that such enervating luxuries have transformed the western jaw into the eastern chin (I would mark Algernon O'Houlihan as "Exhibit A"), and it may have been this same damnable cream-puff vice that has evolved our tall, gaunt, angular, thin-bellied forebears into the short, cylindrical, roly-poly type of the cities.

And now I come to the most interesting part of your letter—to your confessions regarding "the striking blonde" and "the beautiful brunette." Do you remember that afternoon when you and I and Jimmy Carter had our fortunes told? It was really the only interesting thing that Jimmy ever proposed, and quite accidental too, for his inspira-

tion was purely alcoholic. We took a cab and went to a score of places, and if you can remember you will recall that in nineteen of these places it was foretold that your future was to be entangled with a light and a dark woman—and now here they are! How can you scoff at palmistry?

Thorpe grinned reminiscently. "I do remember that bit of foolishness," he muttered. "And for once the fortune-teller seemed to have hit the mark."

I am staying down town to-night at the request of young Hinkle, who wants to consult me upon the legal points involved in changing his name. He has had a lot of trouble with it. His first name is Hiram and so he tried dividing it in the middle, but the result was H. Hobbs Hinkle, and altogether unsatisfactory. He is consulting me about changing Hobbs to Hetherington or Heliotrope, or some such name appropriate to his new dignity as the sole owner of a prize-winning poodle—an honor which he has but recently attained. I suggested Hell-bent-on-the-Hudson, but he said it sounded too much like a summer resort. While talking with him, I missed you very much, for I knew that you would have enjoyed the conversation—it was rich. Hinkle is beginning to take himself seriously, but he is still occasionally overcome with his old panicky fear that

he is not doing "the right thing." He is cultivating that "don't-you-know,—old-chap" kind of talk, and when I sprang some new anglicisms on him (which I invented on the spot) I left him pleased but puzzled.

Speaking of clubs, you will be interested to know that Ferdinand DeQuincy Potts has at last been admitted to the club at whose door he has so tirelessly knocked. This after ten years on the waiting list! And he owes it all to the good offices of Diefendorfer. Do you remember Diefendorfer? Well, there was a club election last week, and to the unspeakable horror of the conservatives, Diefendorfer, the Tar King, was elected president. You remember that Potts inherited the glue fortune. Well Diefendorfer got him in. Glue and tar—they stick together. (Joke.)

With the exception of the above important events, New York is unchanged. Indeed the city seems to thrive notwithstanding your absence, and although I have read the papers carefully, I have not noticed that any chorus girl has starved to death—in this I am surprised. While on this subject I must tell you the worst: Birdie McSweeney—she of the front row, the chronic understudy but who never went on as such—has married. Last night she was united in more or less holy wedlock, to your hated rival, Dugan, the scene-shifter. Brace up, old man! Remember there is a new chorus lady born every

minute and that they never die. Boston Bill told me this, and he also told me that you owe him four dollars. I gave him your address and I suppose you will hear from him. He is another who will miss you.

This is about all the gossip I know, except that I was in Washington last week on some business for our people, and I met some of your western statesmen. They wore no feathers in their hair, carried no bowie-knives or other wild-west regalia, and if they ever were the guileless and unsophisticated children of the boundless prairies, they showed no evidence of it. On the contrary, their eyes had the "steely glint" accredited to avarice, and in fact they looked just like some of our own great men. Confidentially these gentlemen are not in the national capital for their health. I have been told that one of them, while honoring a lesser office out West, would take a peck of onions if nothing better was offered. However, I stand very well with them now, and so if you ever want anything of them, write me and I think I can handle it for you.

Let me hear from you soon. Write me a long letter and don't fail to tell me of all your conquests with the pretty Indian maidens.

This reminds me that there is a melodrama running on Broadway, entitled "In Wyoming." I dropped in to see it the other night, but only stayed for one act. I left with the ear-ache. I suppose it

was a fairly accurate picture of Wyoming life, but it was too strenuous for me. They had to keep all the doors and windows open to let the smoke out. It was worse than a sham battle. In that one act there were two or three thousand Indians killed, and as there seemed to be plenty of them left, I didn't stay. Why do cowboys wear oilcloth hip boots?

Well, my bird is getting cold and I must close. Sorry you are not here to join me in a bite and a bottle. Write soon to

Your old accomplice,

HARPER.

P. S. There is a quiet a rumor to the effect that N. Y. Northern may come out of its receivership all right. I hope so.

Thorpe laughed as he laid down the letter. "He is a dear old chap," he said fondly, "and I must have him out here some time."

Then picking up the pale blue envelope he regarded it with a smile of anticipation. What was the message that lay beneath this dainty covering of crisp parchment? Was it that the girl had changed her mind about going away, or was it a formal farewell? Could it be an invitation to call, or was it another warning? "Yes, another warning probably," he muttered. "Harper's letter made me almost forget.." A feeling came over him

that it contained something portentous, and for a moment he hesitated before opening it.

Then nervously tearing open the scented blue cover he extracted a daintily folded note, and read:

BUFFALO, WYOMING.

MY DEAR MR. THORPE:

No doubt you will be quite as surprised to receive this little indulgence of mine, as I am to find myself writing it. I can only excuse myself on the ground that you, upon entering the career of a ranchman, find yourself so burdened with business that you have had no time for social duties. Now as a salve to my conscience won't you admit that you have rather neglected me? I haven't seen you for almost two weeks, and the memory of that waltz is constantly with me that——

"A waltz!" ejaculated Thorpe. Then he turned hastily to the last page where, to his amazement, he saw the signature of,—"Cora Sands."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" As the novelists say, "the plot thickens." And then with a broad smile he continued reading.

——I cannot easily forget my partner. Have you forgotten it all? Or was it merely an incident of "seeing the town?" Or is it that a pair of brown eyes are accountable for your abstraction? I saw

you in a buckboard in front of the post-office the other day, and I must admit to being just a trifle envious of the person with you.

But then the abhorrent thought comes to me that perhaps you may not wish to cultivate me socially —then I must see you on business. You never told me that you were a lawyer, but I found it out. There is only one really competent lawyer here, and he is, if you will pardon my bluntness, a crook. I have a legal affair involving a large sum of money and I am unwilling to trust Forbes, so believe me I must see you professionally.

No one ever accused me of being penurious, so it behooves you to call. I live on the street back of the post-office in the cottage with the green blinds. I shall expect you Friday afternoon at 3. Please don't disappoint

Yours sincerely,

CORA SANDS.

Thorpe replaced the note in its envelope, and thrusting it into his coat pocket, whistled softly.

"It beats the devil," he said aloud.

Champion, seated upon the side of a bunk braiding a quirt, looked up inquiringly.

"Nate, how long have you known this Sands woman?"

"Who's she?"

"Why, the Sage-Hen."

"Oh!" and Nate grinned understandingly. "That's Tom Horn's girl. She's been here four or five years I reckon. Why? Are you gittin' gone?"

"No, no," remonstrated the young man impatiently. "She wants to retain me as an attorney."

"And next, remarked Nate calmly, "she'll want to retain you as a sweetheart. I tell you, Johnny, she's a dangerous woman. Now if she wasn't so all-fired good lookin'—" He stopped suddenly as he noticed the tolerant smile upon his employer's face.

"Nate," said Thorpe, slowly, "you are a good cowpuncher, a good bronco-buster, you understand wild horses thoroughly,—raised with them you might say, and you understand every peculiarity they have."

"Y-e-s," agreed Champion.

"Well, where I come from there are no wild horses—only people. And half of them are women! Now Uncle Billy says that 'Every man ought to play his own game,' and with this quotation Thorpe waved his hand as though to dismiss a subject too inconsequential for argument.

Champion understood and he immediately became serious.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I've seen fellers jest as confident as you are, Johnny. There was a feller down to Cheyenne named Henshaw, and he

takes a fancy to this here woman. Used to come plumb up here to see her. Well, Henshaw was a cashier in one of them banks; was married and had a family. He was doin' well 'till he meets this here party; then he gits so kinda dazed he couldn't stinguish between the bank's money and his'n. Henshaw is makin' shoes now, and he's got a steady job for the next ten years. Sixty thousand was what *he* spent on the lady. Yes, sir, she makes 'em go fetch!"

Thorpe smiled indulgently.

"Then there was a ranchman from down aroun' Thermopolis named Radford. He was rich. Yes, sir, he was the biggest man in them parts. Well, *he* plays the game for a while, and he loses out, body, soul, and britches. He loses his ranch, stock, brand, —everything. But as he has to have more money, he gits to rustlin', and he gits ketched at it—which nacherally ends the play. Now if that woman ain't dangerous, what is she?"

"Back East, they would call her a 'Captain of Industry'," laughed Thorpe.

Nate shook his head solemnly.

"You had better leave her alone, Johnny," he advised.

But notwithstanding this warning, the next afternoon saw the young man hitching his horse in front of the cottage with the green blinds.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COTTAGE WITH THE GREEN BLINDS.

PRECISELY at three, Thorpe stood in front of the neat cottage on the side street behind the post-office. The house was a new one, and one of the few in the town built of sawn lumber; resplendent in fresh paint, it stood well back in the yard and isolated from the street by the only picket fence in Buffalo. But what most compelled the young man's gaze was that there were flowers and grass, *real blue grass*, in the yard—the first he had seen in the West. This cheerful sight raised the young man's spirits; for to one accustomed to the verdure of the East, there is something depressing about the monotonous gray of the sand and the sage, and to suddenly come across a bit of greensward is like the unexpected meeting of an old friend.

Whistling cheerily he opened the gate and approached the house, where no sooner had he knocked than the door was thrown open and Cora Sands stood before him, a vision so suddenly revealed that the blasé Easterner stared in unmistakable admiration.

"I knew you would come," she said, with a

dazzling smile. "I felt sure of it," and she shook his hand with a warmth that left no doubt as to the cordiality of his welcome.

Her gown was of some kind of soft clinging stuff that accentuated every line and curve of her splendid figure. A jeweled pin, her sole ornament, fastened low at the throat, exposed the broad and shapely outlines of her neck; and her hair, illumined for the moment by the bright afternoon sunlight, seemed of spun gold—"a fitting crown," thought the young man, for this regally glorious picture that stood framed in the doorway.

Wonderingly Thorpe entered the house, and dazedly he seated himself in the easy-chair which she indicated by a graceful gesture of her symmetrical and half bare arm.

The room was furnished in a tasty manner, comfortable even to luxuriousness. The handiwork of occidental rug-makers, the Navajos, covered the floor and others of bizarre pattern hung upon the walls. A Cheyenne war-bonnet was festooned over the fireplace, and flanking it upon either side were huge Mojave water-bottles. Specimens of Zuni pottery and grass baskets were on the mantel, and a few well executed pictures in oils of dobe missions and Moqui villages were the final touch to the western ornamentation.

"There are some cigars in the jar at your elbow, Mr. Thorpe, and I know you want to smoke. Not

being a society belle, I can't join you," she added, laughingly.

As he reached for the jar, Thorpe was surprised to see upon the table most of the better periodicals and many of the late novels. Selecting a cigar, he lit it and then sinking comfortably back in the big chair, he contemplated the woman much as though she were some good genii who had bestowed upon him the blessing of infinite content.

"This is the most satisfactory moment I've had," he drawled, "since I came West."

An unmistakable flush of pleasure came over the woman's face.

"And to think," she commented, eyeing him narrowly, "you would not have experienced it had I not written all that bosh about wanting a lawyer."

"In that," returned Thorpe, lazily blowing a smoke ring ceilingwards, "you are mistaken. I would have come anyway—perhaps not to-day, but surely to-morrow, or the next day. And as for law business, I have quit it—reformed. In me you see a prominent ex-attorney and an embryotic cattle-baron. Yes," he added seriously, "I have quit the law business for good."

The woman threw herself, half reclining, upon the divan in front of him. Every curve of her voluptuous figure was exhibited to its fullest advantage. Her coiffure, with its riotous profusion of

tawny braided strands, stood out in sharp relief against the dark background of the wall behind her. Two plump arms peeped alluringly from their sleeves of lace, and a recalcitrant fold of her skirt exposed a pretty foot and a slim ankle.

All of this the young man saw. He felt the blood quicken in his veins and it was only with an effort that he was able to preserve his exterior of calmness.

"Yes, I would have come anyhow," he reiterated. "That waltz, you know, has been troubling me."

"Troubling you?" she questioned with a happy laugh. "How?"

"Yes, troubling me. I have been wondering," he continued, and his voice became a trifle hard and deliberate, "if it has made as big a fool of me as the rest of them—as Henshaw or Radford."

He had expected a demonstration at this, but the woman remained imperturbed. For a moment she eyed him silently and then she laughed.

"Yes, they were fools," she agreed, "just fools, that's all."

Thorpe nodded his head gravely.

"And so you have been making inquiries about me, have you? The woman asked the question in a calm, easy tone, yet there was a trace of eagerness in her voice that did not escape him.

"Of course I have. Why not? You have about me."

"Yes," she admitted; "but it was because I was interested."

"I did," returned Thorpe, "for the same reason. And then again," he continued, determined to hold back nothing. "I have been wondering if Tom Horn will shoot my head off for coming here."

"Tom Horn!" she exclaimed scornfully. "You may disregard that contingency. He won't shoot you—unless, of course, I tell him to," she added banteringly.

"Well, don't get careless," laughed Thorpe.

The subject was evidently distasteful to her, and she endeavored to dismiss it with a few words.

"Mr. Thorpe," she began, "like every one else out here, I have some history behind me; but I am about to begin life anew. All the old life is past and gone, and the new one will be different."

"But first tell me about Radford and Henshaw," he insisted relentlessly.

She gazed at him steadily for a moment as though undetermined how to phrase her reply.

"Mr. Thorpe, life is a hard game at best; and out here in this country it is even harder. The struggle is hard enough for a man; for a woman it's—"

She left the sentence unfinished but an expressive gesture conveyed her meaning.

"It's hell," he said sympathetically. "I'll say it for you."

"Yes," she agreed, "it is. I have had to play

the game as I found it. I played it and I won. And as for Henshaw and Radford and the others, they were fools—dupes, of course; but they were a part of the game."

Thorpe could not but admire the woman's frankness and his face must have shown it, for she rose from the divan and came over and seated herself in a chair beside him.

"But you are not a fool, John Thorpe, and that is why I like you. And that's why I like you," she repeated again, and her gray eyes softened as she contemplated the strong face of the man at her side. "You must believe that," she added with a sudden sharpness, "for why else should I be interested in you? You are not rich enough to excite my cupidity—if you believe me so bad; and the Lord knows you are not handsome."

"I know that," he retorted laughingly. "But there is a sort of fascination about ugly things. Now Billy Fidler keeps a badger, and it is so ugly that——"

"And there are other things that I like about you, too," she interrupted. "You are educated, and you have traveled, and you have read,—you are different from the kind out here. And you are not fulsome, either. Not many would have had the temerity to bring up the names of Henshaw and Radford and Horn, as calmly and as coldly as you have. However, I am glad that you did," she added

after a moment's reflection, "for you would have always had it upon your mind. I could tell you more of my past, but I am not going to—it's the future that I am living for."

Thorpe nodded approvingly.

"Yes, it's the future," she went on. "I am tired of the life I have been living. I—I—" She hesitated and looked at the other searchingly, but she saw no cynicism in John Thorpe's honest blue eyes, so she continued: "I am going to sell out and go away from here. I am going to settle down some place and be—be respectable."

She feared some facetious comment at this, and she was gratified that there was none.

"For two years I have had that end in mind, and now, at last, I am in a position where I can do it. I can get twenty thousand for my interest here, and besides I have money in the bank." She leaned forward in her chair and lowered her voice: "Nearly eighty thousand in money and paper."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Thorpe. "You're rich! Yes, rich enough to marry some foreign nobleman," he laughed.

"Be serious," she entreated. "I want your advice."

"Well, that's sound advice to a lot of people," he persisted. "It's pretty dull in St. Petersburg right now with cab-drivers and you could get a Russian Prince quite reasonable. Did you ever

think of the grandeur of being driven up to the royal palace, not by your husband of course, and of hearing yourself announced: 'The Princess Zwinski'? Or have you ever thought of the joy of being beat by an Italian Count? Or of being robbed by a French Marquis? Or—" He stopped for he suddenly noticed that the wistful look upon the woman's face had turned to an expression almost of sadness. "Pardon me. I was only joking, of course. But really," he added, with an attempt at justification, "what I have said would be considered seriously, back East."

"My ambition doesn't run in that direction," she returned, with a wan smile. "I will marry some one, of course," and the wonderful gray eyes looked into his in a manner that made him shift uneasily in his chair, "but it will be an American. He will be a good man, an honest man, and one that I can respect and,—yes, even reverence. And when I have fully determined who that man is," she continued, with a grim resolution, "why, I will have him—that's all. It's a little way I have of getting what I want. No obstacle will be too great; no sacrifice too dear."

He looked at the woman admiringly.

"I hardly think you will have to use coercion," he ventured.

"Why, I am not such a bad woman," she went on argumentatively. "I have had a past, yes; but I

have done some good things, too, in my life. I won't speak of the number of people that I have helped, or what I have given to charity, or what other things I have done; but I assure you the list would not be a short one. My experience of the past will help me in the future—I will be a better woman by reason of it. Yes, better than I could be if I had not have had it. But my life has not been of my own choosing," she hastened to explain, and there was a bitterness in her voice. "Believe me, it was all forced upon me," and Thorpe saw the mist that gathered upon the long lashes, and a feeling of the utmost sympathy came over him.

"Yes, yes. No doubt," he said consolingly.

For a few minutes the woman seemed lost in reverie—in a silent contemplation of the dark years that had passed. And then her face brightened as her thoughts returned to the future.

"Have you fully determined to be a cattleman, John?" she asked softly, and she laid her slim white hand upon his arm. "Have you determined to live and die here, in these bleak hills—among these brutal, illiterate savages?"

"Why, yes," he replied wonderingly.

"Well, it's a hard life—and it's going to be a dangerous one," she added meaningly.

"I'm going to stick it out," he said determinedly, "for everything I possess is invested here."

"There are other things feasible, John," she

said slowly, "and things that you would enjoy more —things away from here. Say an orange grove in California. A place within easy distance of Los Angeles or San Diego, with all the delights of the city and the country and the seashore. A hundred acres or so, a bungalow surrounded by pepper trees, a well kept lawn, flowers, a private bathing beach, a garden and——"

"Why," interrupted Thorpe, "it would cost a fortune, and I——"

"Yes, I know," she broke in eagerly, "but I—"

Instantly, as though illumined by some vivid flash of lightning, the woman's desire stood revealed, and almost as quickly he stopped her with: "You say the cattle business will be more dangerous? Why? Do you mean on account of the troubles with the settlers?"

The questions remained unanswered. The woman's face fell and she sank back in her chair with a long tremulous sigh that but feebly expressed her disappointment. For a time neither spoke.

"John," she said, at last, "I *did* send for you on account of business after all. But I foolishly got talking of other things and I fear that I have bored you. I really," and she smiled faintly, "have been quite maudlin. We will both forget it. And now," and her manner changed to that of the cold, hard, unsympathetic, worldly-wise proprietress of

the dance-hall, "I will come to the business of which I have spoken. I have a matter which involves a very large sum of money, and I want you to look after it for me. It's a will case."

"A will case?"

"Yes, a will case. My father died not long ago leaving a large estate. A will has been filed, and I understand it leaves everything to another—a cousin. I can't investigate the matter myself, so I want you to look into it for me. If the leaving of the estate to my cousin was my father's real intention, I shall let the matter drop. But in the meantime," she admonished, "consider this sacredly confidential."

Thorpe hesitated. "I have given up the Law." he began, "and——"

"Stuff! Nonsense!" ejaculated the woman. "You *must* do this for me—I insist on it."

"Well, all right," he acquiesced slowly; "but I had been in hopes that the Law was a thing of the past with me."

"I believe you are a better lawyer than you are a cattleman," she ventured.

"If I wasn't I'd have small hopes for the outcome of your case," he returned. "Now where was the will filed?"

"Here."

"Here? Your father lived here?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes," she replied quietly, "he lived here."

"What was his full name?" he inquired, drawing a pencil from his pocket for the purpose of making a note.

"William Sawyer."

"William Sawyer? Not the William Sawyer of the WS ranch?"

"The same," she replied, and she smiled sadly. "I am his only child."

"Then your name is not Sands—unless, of course, you have been married?"

"No, it is Sawyer—Cora Sawyer. I changed it ten years ago." And then noticing the look of amazed incredulity upon the young man's face, she continued: "My mother died when I was quite young, and I, like Topsy, 'jest growd'. My father, as perhaps you have heard, was a man of ungovernable temper; and, as I was not without spirit myself, we didn't get along very well together. And so it happened," she went on, "that when I was about sixteen years old, we had a most violent quarrel and my father, in the heat of his passion, drove me from home. I didn't know where to go. Of the world beyond these dreary hills, I was ignorant. I came to town and for a few days stopped at the hotel. Kennedy found me there and tried to get me to return home, but to this I was stubbornly opposed. Finding that he could do nothing with me he gave me a long fatherly talk—and one which I

often thought of since—and all the money he had, three hundred dollars, and left me. He made me promise to write him, which I never did, except to return him his money—that was from Hong-Kong I think. Well, from here I went to Denver, and from there to 'Frisco. I lived in that city three years and then I went to Hong-Kong; and from there to Calcutta,—Cairo, Rome, Paris—I have lived all over the world. For five years I was gone, during which time I lived in every capital in Europe —and then I came here. I wanted to see my old dad. And now comes a strange thing—almost unbelievable; and that is, that after I had gotten here, I found that my rebellious spirit,—my obstinate, perverse nature would not allow myself to reveal my identity, I cannot explain it. It is so. I often saw my father, but he never recognized me—in fact no one ever has. I had changed much in ten years. From a simple little country girl in a gingham frock, I had grown to womanhood, and my manner had changed to that of—well," and she gestured expressively. "And there was another reason that I was not recognized, and that was that I had caused a report to be sent back from Hong-Kong of my death—that this it not so, you alone are the only person that knows. Shortly after coming here I bought the theater, and I have been here ever since. That's my story."

Through the narrative. Thorpe had listened with

intense interest, and now at its conclusion he regarded the woman with a look of compassion.

"So that's your story," he repeated. "But how did you live—" He checked himself abruptly. "And so your father left his fortune to that cad, Hall."

"You know him then?"

"Yes, I have known him for years. Went to college with him. I know him well, and a more contemptible fellow never lived. Yes, I'll take the case," he added grimly, "and if there is any way of diverting the estate from Hall's pocket to yours, you may rest assured I will do it."

He rose to go.

"John," said the woman extending her hand, "I hope that you will forgive and forget the weakness I have shown this afternoon. Years of loneliness, you know—but then it won't happen again," and she looked up at him with a smile that was intended to mask the weariness that he saw in her face.

She followed him to the gate and watched him untie his horse.

"You must keep me informed as you progress on the case."

"I will," he promised, putting his foot in the stirrup.

"And I shall expect to see you within a few days, John," she called after him.

"I'll call again not later than day after to-morrow," he returned.

As Thorpe came out of the house a buggy turned into the street. Whether or not the woman saw it, he never knew. The buggy contained a man and a woman; and the man, recognizing the couple at the gate said something hurriedly to his companion and they both turned and looked, and as they did so Thorpe recognized Hall and his cousin, Helen Sawyer.

"Good afternoon!" he greeted, at the same time doffing his hat.

The man nodded coldly, but the girl turned her head haughtily aside.

Thorpe's face crimsoned. "Damnation!" he exclaimed. "Now this *is* hell!"

He rode moodily up the street and as he turned the corner he looked back and saw the graceful figure still standing by the gate, and his face lightened as she waved at him. For the moment he hesitated. An almost overpowering impulse came over him to turn his horse around and go back. For an instant he wavered; and then his horse receiving a most cruel stab of the young man's spurs, sprang forward and the woman was lost to view.

CHAPTER XVI.

ORGANIZING.

THE committee meeting was called late and it lasted long. Not until midnight did the men get together in Bill Forbes's room, and not until dawn did they depart. One by one the lights in the dance-hall went out, gradually the crowd on the street dwindled to a few belated revelers, slowly the East became purpled with the approach of another day, and then the conspirators tiptoed down the dark stairs and emerged into the honest morning sunshine where they blinked guiltily for a moment and then hurriedly took themselves off. And one might have noticed that there was a look of grim seriousness upon the saturnine countenances of these men even more than usual, for they had, after this night of argument and discussion, decided upon a thing that for audacity of conception, unscrupulousness of purpose, and daring of execution, was to exceed any of the incidents in the history of the ever tragic West—a thing that was destined to attract the attention of the Nation, and yet, dark and perfidious as it was, one that was to be spoken of as an instance of "frontier justice."

Had Hall himself ventured to explain his plan for the saving of the open range, the committee would probably have been merely amused; but as it was the hard-headed and practical Hank Kennedy who skilfully unfolded the plot, the men listened with close attention. At first they were appalled at the enormity of the scheme, and some there were who refused to consider it seriously; but Kennedy knew his subject well. Patiently he went into the details; every situation he met with an eloquence that surprised even himself. And yet there was little to explain, for the plan was amazingly simple; and as for the scope of the enterprise, in that, he told them, lay its success. Gradually he won them over; one by one they became convinced of the practicability of the scheme, and in the end they resolved, without a dissenting voice, to put the plan into operation,—and at once. There was only one important change in the original scheme, and that was,—to enlist aid from Snake River cattlemen, who were confronted by the same peril,—the menace of the settler.

Once committed, they, with characteristic western impetuosity, agreed that there should be no delay. The thing should be done before the Spring round-up, for, as Kennedy had sententiously remarked, "After it's all over there will be a lot of strange calves to brand."

And so it came to pass that in Cheyenne three days later there met in a room in the Inter-Ocean hotel, eight men, of whom three were from the

Snake River country in Uintah county. And the chairman of this body of quiet, determined men was was none other than the Easterner, Algernon Alfred Hall. In the brief space of three days the pale-faced young man had risen from the part of humble follower to that of leader. It was Kennedy who was responsible for this metamorphosis, for after he had fairly won the men to his cause, he in a spirit of fairness, told them that the entire plan of campaign had originated in the brain of his employer. And the men, though hidebound with the narrow prejudices of their class, were quick to appreciate genius, and, albeit with some reluctance, they accorded him the respect that was his due, for in their own words he had "made good."

"Now, gentlemen," said Hall, glancing around at his cabinet seated about the table, "we must be systematic in our organization. We must subdivide the work, so that every man will have a duty to perform. If that is done the campaign will proceed smoothly and without a hitch; if it is not done we will all find ourselves in a nasty mess."

Several of the men nodded their heads wisely at this, and Hall proceeded:

"Briefly, we have two things to accomplish: First, the elimination of the undesirables; and second, the approval of public sentiment—in short, justification. And I want to tell you that the last is just as important as the first. If public senti-

ment is not with us, we are lost. I know this because I have opposed it before. It will be a comparatively easy thing to rid ourselves of these settlers, but we can't fight the Nation afterwards."

"You are dead right!" put in Lem Fulton, who being a politician as well as a Snake River cattleman had a proper appreciation of public opinion. "You got to have the public with you, and you can't have them too strong, neither."

"I suggest," resumed Hall, "that Mr. Kennedy proceed to Arizona or New Mexico or somewhere, and organize our fighting force, who will join with the men whom you Snake River gentlemen have volunteered to recruit in Idaho, on a certain day here in Cheyenne. The combined force will then go by special train to Casper where they will take the field."

"And right here," interrupted Buck Harris, "I want to tell Kennedy that I hears that ole Cap Stanley is down in Paris, Texas. He'd be a big help, cause he keeps tab on the whereabouts of all them there killers he knows."

"Good!" ejaculated several at once.

"My Lord! If I can only git him," said Kennedy, "the fight is as good as over."

Captain Stanley's name was indeed one to conjure with—a byword in the West, for the old free-lance was the fighting-man *par excellence* in a land of fighting men. Wherever there were wars,

feuds, or trouble, the grizzled old warrior could be found, and always leading the fighting. To his ever-victorious standard, eager to follow where he should lead, flocked the desperate gun-men of the Southwest—men in whom there was a strange combination of that confidence that comes to those who meet with continued success in their sanguinary conflicts, and of an indifference amounting almost to apathy, for they were men who could accept defeat, and to them defeat could mean but one thing, with the fatalistic monchalance of the Mohammedan.

"Well, so much for the fighting part," said the chairman: "now for the public sentiment. I will ask Mr. Fulton, as he is a member of the legislature, to secure the passage of a resolution by that body, deploring the state of affairs in Johnson county and authorizing the Governor to offer suitable rewards for the apprehension of the cattle thieves."

"And I propose, further," said Dave Martin, "that we see to it that the State Association pass a resolution to the same effect, and that it also condemns the county officials for neglect of duty."

"A very good suggestion," commented Hall. "And it will be my part to see that both resolutions are properly exploited in the newspapers."

Ace Gentry, who had hitherto remained silent, arose and with great ceremony nominated Hall as the one "to ride herd on all these blankety, blank

newspapers what's goin' to cost us so much blankety, blank money." And to this office Hall was elected by acclamation.

"I believe I am fitted for the position," said Hall, by way of a speech of acceptance, "on account of a great deal of experience back East."

"You sure are," agreed Gentry enthusiastically. "Next to some of them simlin-headed, aig-suckin' hounds what foller the business regularly, you are the best man we could git."

"Yes, yes," said the recipient of this doubtful compliment, somewhat impatiently. "And while we are on the subject of publicity, let us create a little fiction for the morning papers. How many head of stock has the Bootjack lost this year?" he asked, turning to Martin.

"Oh," replied Martin, grinning, "put me down for fifty."

"Make it more."

"Well double it—a hundred."

"An odd number is better," remarked Hall, making a note. "I'll put you down for a hundred and ten. And now, Mr. Gentry, how about the Diamond S?"

"Seventy five."

"Put the Bar D down for sixty for Dixon; ninety-five of the 46 stuff for Higgins; and we'll tell them about it afterwards," suggested Kennedy.

"Very good," said Hall, putting down the figures.

"And now what is your brand, Mr. Duncan?" he inquired of one of the Snake River men.

"The Wagon-wheel. Eighty-five for me."

"And yours, Mr. Fulton?"

"Bar Y Bar. Sixty."

"I estimate your loss, Mr. Harris, at fifty. And I will put the WS down for—?" and he looked inquiringly at Kennedy.

"Put us down for two hundred and fifty."

"And now, gentlemen," concluded Hall, "I suggest that we adjourn to meet here to-morrow afternoon to report progress."

The motion was carried, and as they filed out of the room, the admiring Lem Fulton nudged Kennedy. "Say," he said, "that boss of your'n is sure 'nough business, ain't he?"

At noon the next day, when Kennedy left for Texas, he took with him an article clipped from the morning's paper.

* * * *

To speak of Paris to the ordinary person conveys some reference to that world-center of frivolity upon the banks of the Seine, and it creates in the mind highly-colored pictures, perhaps, of the *Champs Elysees,* or of silk-hatted *boulevardiers,* or of the picturesque *Quartier Latin,* or, perchance, the splendors of the *Louvre;* but the Texan is no ordinary person

and to him there is but one Paris, and that vortex of gayety is situated in the northeastern part of the state, proud and haughty among its lesser neighbors, for, gentle reader, it is the county-seat of the province of Lamar. The native doubts not that the foreign city of the same name is but a base imitation of his own, for in truth there is a similarity—and also a difference. To be sure there are no world-famed boulevards, but there is a "Main Street;" and it must be admitted that the silk hat is not seen as frequently as the sombrero, and that wax-pointed mustaches are less in evidence than those of the walrus variety; and it must also be confessed that the local Latin Quarter is irreverently referred to as "Greaser town,"—all of this is conceded, *but* if the magnificence of the Louvre is missing, it is more than balanced by the presence of that splendiferous edifice dedicated to the Texas thirst, and known as the Alamo.

The object of Kennedy's search was not hard to find. In response to his inquiry the station-master directed him to the Alamo; the driver of the "bus" did the same, the clerk at the hotel repeated the formula, and he was verified by a policeman on the street. The Texas Parisian in looking for a person, goes first to the Alamo and in nine times out of ten he seeks no further. And so it happened that in less than a half hour after his arrival, Kennedy was ushered into the presence of the mighty Stanley, in a back room of the Alamo.

The foreman of the WS, like all fighting men, had an admiration for courage in others. For years he had heard of the exploits of the old free-lance whose audacious and cool daring had so often entered into and made a part of the history of the West, and he had set out upon his mission with a pleasing thrill of anticipation. He found a slender man of medium stature, whose quiet manner and soft voice would seem to belie his reputation as a man-at-arms. Yet there were stern lines beneath the grizzled, close-cropped mustache, and the steel-gray eyes which beamed genially upon Kennedy, had a way of turning, at times, hard, cold, uncompromising.

The Captain's record was a long one: A Texan by birth, he won his spurs in Kansas where he had served,—and incidentally survived,—the office of marshal in several of the early cow-towns,—which is no little thing in itself. Then he emigrated to Arizona and enlisted in a private feud which he brought to such an abrupt termination that he was obliged from sheer *ennui* to return to unhappy Kansas and engage in a county-seat war. So great was the reputation that preceded him, that upon his arrival the dispute was settled without bloodshed, and the Captain in disgust returned to his native state and became a ranger. In this last employment he was disappointed. "Why, I feel jes' like a common policeman!" he complained. "They tells me

to *maintain* order. Shucks, I ain't never done nuthin' but *create* order!" And so when he saw an opportunity of being appointed deputy United States marshal, he seized it eagerly. At last he was happy, for he worked under the orders and in perfect harmony with the admiring and indulgent Federal Judge of Fort Smith, and for a number of years he pursued a blissful existence capturing and exterminating the bad-men of the adjacent Territory. But there is an end to all things, and so it was that a national election, and the consequent change of administration, left the old warrior again without a cause, and now once more he strained a listening ear for a tocsin of grim-visaged war.

"Now, Cap," said Kennedy, impressively, "these here rustlers are sure bad. They ain't no quit or give-up to 'em—why, they wouldn't surrender to the whole doggone United States army!"

The Captain nodded interestedly. It was the kind of talk that warmed the very cockles of his heart.

"And what's more," continued Kennedy, "these here rustlers has got everybody buffaloed. Them that ain't in with them, is afraid to peep. It's a big ring and there ain't no tellin' how many is in it. I reckon most all the county officers is in—I know some as is. Why, man, it's got so bad that the legislature has took it up! And the Cattle Raisers' Association, too! Look here," and Kennedy produced the article clipped from the Cheyenne paper.

The Captain took it and read:

RUSTLING RAMPANT IN WYOMING.

LEGISLATURE AND STOCK ASSOCIATION PRESS RESOLUTIONS.

"Cattle stealing has increased to such an alarming extent that the Legislature and the Cattlemen's Association declare the very existence of the industry threatened.

"Cattlemen stopping at the Inter-Ocean hotel report that the rustlers have become bolder and bolder, and now the ranchmen are asking themselves whether or not they can afford to remain in the business. Where before the casual rustler stole one or a dozen head, now organized gangs drive off hundreds. This condition of affairs is said to be especially bad on the Powder River ranges in Johnson county. The district immediately to the west of that country, known as the Hole-in-the-Wall country, is said to be the habitat of the cattle thieves and outlaws who are responsible for the depredations. There they live in comparative security, for tremendous cliffs prevent any entrance into their fastness, except at certain passes known only to the rustlers themselves. Outrages of a similar kind are also said to have been perpetrated in Uintah county in the Snake River district.

"The Legislature passed a resolution yesterday afternoon, and a committee was appointed, of which Mr. L. T. Fulton was named as chairman, to investi-

gate the matter and make some recommendation to the Governor, who will probably offer suitable rewards for the arrest and conviction of the thieves.

"Resolutions were also passed at a hastily called meeting of the Wyoming Stock Raisers' Association in which much feeling was shown. The Association will employ detectives to gather evidence and criminal prosecutions will follow.

"Mr. A. A. Hall, owner of the well-known WS ranch in Johnson county, is at the Inter-Ocean, and in response to the persistent inquiries of the reporter, reluctantly admitted to his own loss of two hundred and fifty within the last few months. Mr. Hall said:

"'Yes, I regret to say there has been a great deal of cattle-rustling in Johnson county. I trust that the country will take the matter calmly, for I believe, if the truth was known, it would precipitate a panic among banks, merchants, and creditors of the cattlemen generally.

"'The cattlemen will make no money this year; on the contrary they will lose a great deal. Although I have lost but two hundred and fifty, the aggregate number of cattle stolen from my neighbors will run over a thousand. It is hard to estimate the financial loss, but I should say that it will run over a hundred thousand dollars this year.

"'The thieves seem to have a perfect organization. After a raid upon the ranges, they retreat to

their hiding-place in the Hole-in-the-Wall country, where they are safe from the grasp of the Law, for one man in the entrances of the mountain pass could defend the valley against an army. The ranch-owners are very indignant over their losses and talk of summary action, but I trust that no violence will be used and that the courts will be able to deal with the offenders.' "

If Captain Stanley had had any doubts as to the righteousness of the cause, they were now dispelled, and as he handed the article back Kennedy saw his eyes sparkle with the old joyous war-lust, and he knew that the Captain had already espoused the side of the cattlemen.

"Looks like some fighting has got to be did, eh?" said Kennedy.

"It shore does," agreed the Captain.

"Well, as I tells you before, I represents the Wyoming Cattle Raisers' Association, and they want you to take charge. You can bring as many of your friends along as you can git."

"How many are you figurin' on takin' up there?"

"We'd like you to git us 'bout a hundred; and we are goin' to git a bunch of Idaho fellers who will join us in Cheyenne."

The Captain repressed a smile of delight, for it was evident that the cattlemen were organizing on no small scale.

"How 'bout the pay?" he cautiously inquired.

"Liberal as can be," replied Kennedy. "The boys will git five a day and fifty for each one of them varmints he can down—and expenses, of course."

"Well now, you say fifty each for scalps, but how many is there to git?" inquired the Captain, and he awaited the reply with the breathless anxiety of a sportsman inquiring about the abundance of game.

"Why, the woods are full of 'em," laughed Kennedy.

The proposition seems fair," remarked the Captain, pensively. It shore does."

"Yes, and it goes double for you," said Kennedy.

The Captain extended his hand and the pact was made.

"And now," said Kennedy, with that brisk air of a man who has made a good bargain, "when can you round-up your men? We want all we can git—but remember they got to be sure 'nough killers—this here job ain't goin' to be no picnic I can tell you."

"I wouldn't go if it was," retorted Stanley shortly. "I'll start to collect the crowd right away."

"Don't stop to write," commanded Kennedy. "Wire for 'em. And say, I reckon you can use some expense money now," and he pulled a huge bundle of yellow-back currency from his pocket and peeling off a hundred dollar bill handed it to the

Captain. "And when that's gone," he remarked, "remember there's more at the old stand."

"Let me see," muttered the Captain thoughtfully. "I orter git 'bout half of 'em right here in town. There's Luke Kirk, but he can't go 'cause he's in jail—I reckon he'll cry when he hears 'bout it. There's Buck Keshler, but he's tendin' bar and can't git away—but how he would like to go! Bill Gumble can't go 'cause he got shot through the lungs las' week. But I'll git a crowd all right, and they'll be as fine a bunch of shooters as ever was got together."

The representative of the cattlemen nodded approvingly.

"It will take a week to git the boys ready for business, and I think we orter meet somewhere—say in Denver ten days from to-day."

"Keno!" said Kennedy. "We will all meet in Johnny Parks's saloon in Denver, ten days from to-day—let's see, that will be April the fourth. We'll ketch a night train for Cheyenne where we will meet the other fellers, so we had better meet in the saloon in the evenin' after supper."

"How much of a outfit shall the boys take along?"

"None at all. We outfit you complete—guns, cartridges, hosses, chuck—everything."

"Good!" exclaimed Stanley, enthusiastically. "But you ain't goin' to include saddles and bedding too?"

"Yes," replied Kennedy," we outfit you complete. At Casper, where we git off the train, every man will git a hoss, Winchester, and two six-shooters. We are goin' like a army—plenty of supplies, ammunition, and every weapon the same caliber. And we're goin' in style, too—three supply wagons and a doctor."

"Whew!" whistled the Captain. "Ain't that some!"

"Now I'm goin' to depend on you to git to work," was Kennedy's final instruction.

The Captain needed no urging. He got to work, and for the next few days the Alamo looked like a recruiting station in war-time. Far and wide traveled the rumor that Stanley was raising an army for some mysterious invasion, and many were the applications to enlist and go—whither they knew not, nor did they care. A motley crowd they were: adventurous cowpunchers, gamblers out of luck, notorious whisky peddlers from the Territory, ex-marshals who had hunted them, and a few professional killers who, like the Captain, seemed to have no other occupation.

While Stanley labored with these men, turning down ten where he accepted one, the telegraph, day and night, was tirelessly reaching out its long fingrs in the task of locating other wandering knights of the six-shooter. Was Ben Fraser in San Antonio? Could Tex Allen be found in El Paso?

Albuquerque was called upon to produce Wells-Fargo Finley, and Tucson was asked to bring forth Shotgun Rawlins. Was Double-split Spencer in Raton? Stuttering Quinn in Fort Smith? George Lee in Trinidad? or the Georgia Kid in Dallas?

Almost hourly the next day came tidings of the lost ones. Mr. Rawlins, he of the abbreviated fowling-piece, had left Tucson and had gone to Silver City, but a message to that place disclosed the fact that he had again changed his domicile to Deming. A telegram to the latter place found him, and it brought the reply that owing to an unfortunate "full" being beaten by four treys, he could not be in Denver on the day designated—in other words Mr. Rawlins was broke. A fifty-dollar bill mailed to the station agent at Deming, with instructions to purchase Mr. Rawlins a ticket and to give him the balance—only upon the day of departure—remedied the difficulty and he was counted on to be present with his celebrated weapon of sinister history.

From Raton came the sad intelligence that Mr. Spencer had dealt yet another of his unfortunate double splits, whereat a sheep-man, who had never before in his whole life played anything but case-cards, became so incensed that he perforated said Spencer so effectually that he had turned over his box for the last time.

Stuttering Quinn was correctly reported to be in Fort Smith, but could not leave. If the Captain

would secure his reprieve and parole for thirty days he would be delighted to join the expedition—otherwise he was to be hung upon the first Friday in April.

"Well," chuckled Stanley, "if they ask him on the scaffold if he has anything to say, and he has, and they wait for him to say it, he'll never be hung—he'll die of old age first. He's the stutterinest white man I ever see."

CHAPTER XVII.

UNCLE BILLY'S HUNCH.

WHERE Uncle Billy got his stake is a mystery. The old man had been most palpably broke since his return from Omaha, and he had been forced to content himself with watching the play of others. But the financial operations of gamblers have ever been incomprehensible to the lay mind. Somewhere and somehow they find the wherewithal, for "once a gambler always a gambler," they must ever be in the play. Certain it was that the ten-dollar gold-piece was not a case-keeper's tip, for the old man always refused such gratuities, and with even greater positiveness it can be asserted that the money came not from any of the ordinary and prosaic ways of getting it, for Work and Uncle Billy were strangers.

It is a matter of history, however, that shortly after the installation of the swing shift, about three o'clock in the morning and after Case Wheeler had stepped down from the look-out's chair and exchanged places with the dealer,—that then it was that Uncle Billy got his hunch. Softly and noiselessly Wheeler had shuffled the cards, and then after inserting the deck in the box with a snap, he placed it in front of him exposing the soda-card, the seven

of clubs. Then came that strange, inexplicable divination, known to gamblers as a "hunch." A mysterious thing it is the hunch—a thing bordering on the occult—a caprice of the gods which gives to favored individuals a glimpse into the future. Instantly it was revealed to Uncle Billy that the exposed card could only foretell one thing—that the ace and trey were to lose twice in succession, and that the jack was to win three times out of the four. It was an old superstition with him—times without number he had seen it so come out of the box. The gods were indeed propitious!

Hastily fishing out a solitary eagle from a pocketful of matches and loose tobacco, the old man placed it on the corner of the ace and crowned it with a copper, and then putting a marker upon the jack to signify that his wager was also to be hazarded upon that card, he lit a cigar and waited with the comfortable assurance that his faith would be well rewarded. And he was not disappointed, for upon the first turn of the cards the trey lost and the jack won, whereupon the usually expressionless and wooden-faced dealer looked up from under his green visor and smiled encouragingly. Uncle Billy needed no encouragement however, for from that time on

Wheeler's hand was monotonously reaching into the drawer, for, regarding the old man's superstitious aversion for chips, he was paying in gold, and at the end of the deal the single gold-piece had grown into a tall yellow cylinder aggregating precisely four hundred and thirty dollars.

"Now," said Uncle Billy, as the leader shuffled the cards before placing them back in the box, "take off the limit and I'll do business with a big auger."

"You'll have to see the boss," said Wheeler, a little shortly, for to the most goodnatured dealer in the world such extraordinary good luck is vexatious.

However, Mr. Fidler was summoned and he, after a moment's hesitation, opined that the limit of twenty-five and fifty might be doubled, and with this concession he hastily returned to his poker game where the limit was the ceiling.

There was no indecision in Uncle Billy's play. Rapidly he moved the yellow stacks over the layout, and with such success that the neat, symmetrical columns of double eagles grew so rapidly in vertical dimension as to threaten to topple over among the more plebeian chips of the other players. Many

times did the dealer and the lookout exchange places; new decks were used, new boxes,—everything was done to bewitch the old man's luck and keep his winnings from steadily piling up in front of him. The news of his wonderful luck seemed to have traveled down the street like wild-fire, for soon the place was crowded. Players in other places cashed in and hurried to the scene of excitement that they might see with their own eyes. The bank was losing at a fearful rate, for now a perspiring crowd lined the table a half dozen deep and followed the old man's luck. Those in the front row held their vantage tenaciously while those behind pushed, shoved and struggled to move their money and chips about on the layout; and at each fall of the cards there were delighted ejaculations from the crowd, who now regarded the lucky player almost in the light of a public benefactor. Fidler left his poker game and took the lookout's chair, and though he narrowly watched each turn his face portrayed no dismay at his rapidly diminishing bank roll.

Daylight came and over five thousand in gold and currency lay piled in front of the old man, but with the first ray of the rising sun his luck turned against him. Bet after bet he lost, and men who had sang

his praises as they followed his play now cursed and reviled him. It was no new thing, this fickleness, and beyond a contemptuous smile he made no reply; indeed he seemed to take a grim satisfaction in seeing his faint-hearted followers lose, for throwing caution to the winds he piled his money on the board with reckless abandon. In ten minutes he lost over a thousand, and his last adherent with a farewell execration deserted him and began to copper his bets. The old man laughed softly and looked at his watch, whereat Mr. Fidler expressed the hope that he was not going to quit the game.

"Not just yet," returned Uncle Billy. "I'll stay with you till seven—if I can last," he added with a smile.

And then with renewed energy he scattered his winnings over the layout. The cards flickered slowly out of the box and as each pair was segregated into its respective pile the dealer removed five shining eagles from the board and threw them into the drawer. A half hour passed and another thousand had passed back to the dealer's till, and the crowd again waxed hilarious, for now the old man's loss spelled their gain. Steadily his stakes dwindled until but five stacks of yellow coin were left in front of

him. The old man looked at his watch. It was half past six and the stage would start in a half hour. He was tired, and the perspiring and boisterous crowd who hovered over him and noisily coppered his bets wearied and disgusted him. He arose from his stool and pointed to the money neatly piled upon the table.

"Turn for the pile," he said. "It's twenty-five hundred."

It was a large sum to wager upon the single turn of the cards and Fidler in the lookout's chair hesitated. And yet the old man had been losing steadily and by all the tenets of the gambler's code the probabilities were that he would lose again. This thought came to Fidler as his eyes rested fascinatedly upon the five yellow stacks. They seemed to beckon to him. "Take me, take me," they seemed to say. A hush had fallen upon the crowd and now all eyes were upon him awaiting his reply.

"You don't want to play a case card, do you?" he asked, at last.

"No," replied Uncle Billy, shortly, "I'll play any card you say."

A low hum of admiration swept through the crowd, and Fidler knew he must accept the old man's

proposition or forever be classed as a tin-horn. He looked at the beads in front of the case-keeper and he saw at a glance that the jacks were all alive.

"I'll turn you on the jack," he said, with some embarrassment.

The jack! It was his old hunch—the one he had at the beginning of the game—the jack would win three times out of four. Instantly this thought surged over the wearied player and it revived him; already he felt that the stake was his own.

"It's a bet," he agreed quickly. "Turn."

At a nod from Fidler the dealer slowly slipped the cards one by one from the shining metal box. The crowd leaned forward in breathless expectancy, and the death-like silence of the room was broken only by the rattle of the beads as the case-keeper tallied the turn of the cards.

"Jack loses,—jack wins," droned the dealer.

"A split!" yelled the crowd, "A split!"

The dealer took two of the five yellow stacks and then deftly dividing a third he placed them in the drawer. This done he glanced up at the player with an ill-concealed smile of satisfaction.

"Deal ahead," ordered the old man imperturbably, "deal ahead."

Again the spectators leaned forward in tense silence.

"Trey loses,—jack wins!" suddenly exclaimed an excited onlooker.

The crowd broke into a roar of excited comment, and now, as the big bet was the only one upon the board, their sympathies seemed to be all with the player. Sadly the dealer restored the stake to its original size, and he lingered lovingly for a moment over the stacks of heavy gold. The bet was now on the case jack and Fidler reluctantly nodded for the deal to continue.

Again the dealer mechanically thumbed the cards from the fateful box and placed them alternately in the winning and losing piles. Fidler leaned forward in his chair and nervously licked his dry lips.

As card after card was shoved through the narrow slit, the long drawn breaths of the men crowded about the table told of the suspense under which they labored. Suddenly an explosive roar came from the crowd.

"Jack wins!" they shouted, "jack wins," and they rushed upon the winner in a frenzy of congratulation.

"Put her there, pard," yelled one excited puncher,

proffering a broad expanse of palm, " you're all right!"

Good-naturedly Uncle Billy accepted their felicitations, and then elbowing his way to the bar he threw down a handful of gold-pieces. " Wine for the crowd," he ordered, at which there was a yell of approval and many declarations of ardent and undying friendship and much insistence that he was " all right."

" And now," said the old man, setting down his glass, " I just got five minutes to ketch the stage."

" Where you goin'?" asked a score in the same breath.

" I'm goin' to buck a game what *is* a game," replied Uncle Billy. And with that he picked up the canvas sack containing his winnings, passed out the door, hailed the stage, and once again the old man set out to " make 'em turn over the box in the big game."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAINTED NEWS.

WHEN the order came down the tube to stop the presses, a score of brawny men sprang upon intricate fabrics of polished steel and began an attack upon the huge cylinders with the desperate energy known only to pressmen of metropolitan dalies.

Upstairs the telegraph editor was declaring, "It's the hottest stuff we've had for a month of Sundays! —Great!" But his chief had needed no comment to stir him to action, for already his experienced eye had scanned the copy and already he had measured its worth. "Stop the presses," he had ordered, after the first glance, and now he followed tersely with: "Give it the first page—with pictures. Wire Cheyenne for a thousand more words. Play it up strong!"

And the next morning all New York ravenously devoured the story from the Far West. Business men at their breakfast tables forgot their coffee in their perusal of this latest outrage of the lawless, but no less interesting, "banditti of the plains." Clerks in the crowded cars on their way down town sated their morbidly developed appetite for sensa-

tion, while others gaped over their shoulders and reveled in the horrible retails. And later in the day corner groceries in hamlets from the Potomac to the St. Lawrence became centers of hot indignation, for the "rustler story" had stirred the country from center to circumference. In the words of the cub reporter it was "dope that made 'em sit up and howl for more."

A few days later when Thorpe received a marked copy of New York's yellowest paper, he read the astonishing article aloud to his two men, and his own amusement was only equaled by their disgust. The account covered a half page, was elaborately illustrated, and was headed:

WHOLESALE MURDER.

CATTLE THIEVES TURN ASSASSINS.

MURDER AND ANARCHY RUN RIOT IN WYOMING.

"Cheyenne, April 2. Human life is unsafe in Wyoming. Organized bands of cattle thieves raid peaceful communities, looting houses, stealing cattle, and killing ranchmen. The value of stolen cattle aggregates millions.

"Such is the condition of affairs that the Wyoming legislature has passed resolutions and the governor has been appealed to for protection. Ranchmen have fortified their houses and are living

in terror of their lives. The county officials have confessed themselves powerless to cope with the situation and the governor may ask the federal authorities to restore order.

"In the Big Horn mountains in the northern part of the state is an inaccessible valley known as "the Hole-in-the-Wall." Surrounded by towering cliffs of everlasting granite, it is the abode of a desperate gang of murderers and cut-throats who sally forth from this fastness in periodic raids upon the cattle ranges. The place can only be reached by secret passes and canyons known only to the outlaws who inhabit it. Desperate criminals from every part of the country have fled to this haven, where they plot fresh deviltries secure from the strong arm of the Law. It was in this rendezvous that the Northern Pacific coup was planned, and to this devil's-nest the booty was brought and divided. Many other train robberies have been hatched and executed by the denizens of this valley, but now their genius seems to be directed to cattle stealing.

"The outlaws do not hesitate at murder. Three prominent ranch-owners who happened to come upon the desperadoes unawares, have been killed within the past few months. At the earnest solicitation of the Wyoming Cattle Raisers' Association the governor has offered large rewards for the arrest and conviction of the murderers; but the outlaws, secure in their retreat, only laugh, for well

they know that no man, or men, however courageous, would have the temerity to beard them, even should the secret pass be discovered.

"The last victim to fall to the assassin's bullet was Mr. J. C. Stone, better known as Ranger Stone. He came upon the thieves in the very act of driving off a large herd of cattle. He never lived to divulge their identity for his body, secreted in a clump of cottonwoods, was found several days afterwards partly devoured by wolves.

"That the thieves are well organized, and that their organization is a large one, is evidenced by the fact that they are able to dispose of thousands of cattle without detection. It is thought by some that the gang includes certain ranchers who have lately come into the country and who, in a small way, make some pretense at cattle-raising. It is also hinted that some of the county officials will be found to be implicated—it is a significant fact that the sheriff has made no arrests for the outrages. Although the ranchowners are a law-abiding class, their provocation has been great and they may organize among themselves and deal out summary justice to the guilty ones after the western fashion."

Accompanying the article were many pictures, for the art department had fairly spread itself on the story; and that night many a shivering soul in the crowded tenements of the East Side slept uneasily lest the terrible outlaws from the Hole-in-the-

Wall country should dash up Hester Street scattering death and destruction before them.

The illustration in the center portrayed a cowboy in Mexican costume discovering the body of Ranger Stone. The cowboy sat astride a fat dray-horse a distance of perhaps ten feet from where the body lay, his hand shading his eyes in the most approved melodramatic fashion.. Upon the other side of the prostrate form, scarcely smaller than the horse, were four gigantic wolves who snarled at the cowboy most viciously; and although the man on horseback had a small arsenal strapped about him, he was making no effort to collect the State's very liberal bounty on wolf scalps, but on the contrary was regarding them placidly, even cheerfully, and as though the scene was the most natural and ordinary thing in the world. Below, the three murdered men were depicted in Davy Crockett-costumes of fringed leather, coonskin caps, and bear-claw necklaces. Festooned around the pictures of the three men were things supposed to be characteristic of Wyoming,—mainly Jersey cows, target rifles, and pistols of the fourth-of-July variety. Then, notwithstanding the secret pass known only to the outlaws themselves, there was a picture of the terrible valley itself. The pictures were undoubtedly authentic, for the reader was confronted with the statement that they were "reproduced from sketches made by our special artist on the spot."

Thorpe laughed as he finished reading the article and he passed the paper over to Champion.

"I'll be dogged if they ain't got a greaser discoverin' that body!" exclaimed Nate. "Why everybody knows Billy Johnson discovered that body! And I wish't you'd look at this old goat with the whiskers they got branded 'Ranger Stone!' He didn't have no whiskers! And look at them half-breeds with bear-claws they got for Tom Waggoner and Jim Averill! What the hell kinda paper is this?" he demanded, with a sudden indignation.

"Nate," said his employer, with a pitying air, "it is deplorable that your poor untutored mind cannot appreciate modern journalism. That paper is the greatest one in the world—the editors say so themselves. It claims to have the very largest circulation of any publication on the universe. Thousands read it, and believe implicitly every word that it contains; they are all firmly convinced that we are all cut-throats wearing Mexican costumes and bear-claw necklaces. Why, they would even believe it if they were taken out here and shown different."

"And them eastern people all time talkin' about us bein' ignorant!" snorted Nate disgustedly.

"You are but a simple, primitive man, Nate," continued Thorpe, with a mock solemnity, "and your pathetically unsophisticated intellect craves

only the mere truth and not for sensation. I'd be ashamed of you in New York!"

"If I had the feller what writ that piece I'd accommodate him with a sensation," declared Nate. "Do they write like that all the time?" he demanded.

"Yes, all the time. The nearest to the truth that they ever publish is the weather prediction."

"Well, all I got to say is that I wisht I could git my han's on the feller what owns the outfit," commented Nate grimly.

"I wish you could, too, Nate," returned his employer, smiling.

Much to his surprise Thorpe found more rustler news in his own paper—one noted for its conservatism. It was not as sensational as the account in the other paper and there were no pictures, but it was bad enough; for the facts were distorted almost beyond recognition. There was a stilted editorial on the subject, too, which he read with much interest:

LAW AND ORDER.

"The recent outrages in the West tell us only too truly that the reign of the "bad man" and the lawlessness of the border ruffian are not yet at an end. The small value which these swaggering bullies place upon human life, for they are ever ready with bowie knife or deadly lasso to pick a

quarrel, has disgusted the East where such rowdyism would not be tolerated. We have long known that human life is the cheapest thing in the West, and we have never been surprised at any offence, however flagrant; but now comes the news that the banditti have organized that they may rob and kill upon a wholesale plan—truly a state of affairs most alarming.

"Knavery in any form is odious and detestable and incompatible with the wellfare of society; but when lawlessness is accompanied by such unrestricted violence it seems that it is high time that some competent authority should step in and with a firm hand mete out full and complete justice. This burden will quite likely fall upon the federal government for it is a deplorable fact that the state authorities have confessed their inability to remedy these wrongs. Lamentable as it may seem, this state of chaotic society has ever been upon the frontier—a condition that can only be changed by the hand of Time. It will take years of immigration from the law-abiding and conservative eastern states before the reckless peoples of the West will be fully assimilated, and until that time we will continue to hear of such disregard for life and property and such contempt for the majesty of the Law."

"'It will take years of immigration from the law-abiding and conservative eastern states before the reckless peoples of the West are fully assimilated,'"

read Thorpe over again. "What delightful self-sufficiency! What smug, complacent, patronizing damn-foolishness!" he exclaimed half angrily.

"Here read a *good* paper," interrupted Nate, handing him the Buffalo Voice. "She sure is a hummer, and no mistake!"

Thorpe laughed as he contrasted the little four-page weekly with the bulky dailies from which he had been reading. On the front page was the telegraph news, printed in Denver the week before; the back page, also printed in Denver, extolled the virtues of the various patent medicines. The two inside pages were left blank by the Denver house, for upon these virgin pages were to appear the local news, the local advertising matter, and the editorial utterances of the editor—all written, set up, and distributed by his own hand. And thus was the newspaper business reduced to the last degree of simplicity.

On the local page Thorpe gleaned that "Hack Curtis was in town Tuesday;" that "Court would open Monday; that "Sam Carter killed a bear Thursday;" that "our esteemed subscriber, Mr. William Fidler, just received a barrel of ten-year-old Bourbon on Saturday;" that "the Montrose sisters, champions of the world cornet players and buck-dancers, will appear at the theater the following week;" that "Pete Hill while roofing a house on Sunday fell off and broke his leg;" that "our

honored fellow-townsman, Doc Richards, is negotiating for the building next door to the livery stable, where he purposes opening a first class restaurant—one that will put to shame Casper's dens of dyspepsia and one that will even vie with the gastronomic palaces of Cheyenne itself." All of these items and many more Thorpe read aloud and he was amply repaid by the running fire of comment by his two auditors.

"Now that's what I call good readin'!" sagely remarked Champion, after Thorpe had finished. "But come on, Nick, you gossipy houn'," he added irrelevantly, turning to the silent Ray, "it's time to git supper."

Half the third page was devoted to cattle brands and estray notices, but upon the other half Thorpe found an article that engaged his attention:

BOGUS BANDITS.

"We see by some of our Denver and Cheyenne exchanges that Johnson county is getting the name of being the domicile of outlaws and desperadoes. Nothing could be further from the truth, for not a single case of larceny, grand or petit, has been reported to our district attorney for the past two years, and that speaks pretty well for our county—considering its size.

"According to the stories in the papers, the Hole-

in-the-Wall country is the stamping ground for all kinds of cut-throats who make a regular business of plundering the surrounding country. These tales will amuse our subscribers who know that our neighbors on Powder River are peaceful and law-abiding settlers whose only raids are made upon their own hay fields at harvest time. It has occurred to the editor that these damnable stories were inspired by certain jealous citizens of Casper, who wish to give our fair community a bad name. We do not say positively that this true, but color was given to the theory when a stranger entered our office and offered us a large sum of money if we would publish substantially the same story which has appeared in the Denver papers. He also offered to take a half page of advertising for six months at our own price, provided we would give him a column reading notice each issue, which he frankly stated would be of a similar kind to the Denver articles. All of this we refused, although it has been a long, cold winter *and many subscriptions are now over due.*

"In the Cheyenne papers an interview confirming stories of rustling was accredited to Mr. Hall of the WS ranch. We saw Mr. Hall yesterday and he indignantly denied any such assertion and in fact denied the interview in toto."

Thorpe laid down the paper and gave a low

whistle of surprise. "Press Agents!" he exclaimed softly.

Here was news indeed. Money was being spent to propagate such lies. By whom? He filled his pipe, but it remained unlighted in his hand. "The purpose is evidently to discredit and to cast odium on the Hole-in-the-Wall district," he said to himself. "Yes, that is certain—but why? who could it be? and what could be the motive?" That papers both east and west had published practically the same story told the worldly Easterner that a masterly hand was at work. "And then there's that item about Hall giving an interview—that's puzzling. But he denied it. Was he telling the truth?" The conviction came over him like a flash—— "No, he lied. Why do I believe so? Because Hall is a stranger in Cheyenne; he must have volunteered the interview."

"Supper's ready," announced Champion, sticking his head in from the kitchen.

"Leave mine on the table, Nate," said Thorpe. "I'm doing some tall thinking right now."

"Them ghost stories has got the boss started on some more of them deductions of his'n," remarked Ray, "and he'll hole somethin' 'fore he quits."

"Yes," muttered Thorpe, "Hall and his crowd are spending money for the immediate purpose of making us out law-breakers. Now granting their success in that, what is their ultimate purpose?"

An hour went by and still the puzzled man sat staring blankly at the wall in front of him, struggling vainly for a theory. Over and over again he revolved every phase of public affairs with which his short residence in the country had acquainted him, but circle-wise his reasoning always returned to the starting-point and he made no progress. At last he turned to the two men who having finished their meal, sat quietly smoking in front of the fire.

"Boys," he said, "the mystery is too deep for me. I can't understand it. There seems to be no possible excuse for these stories—unless,"—and Thorpe hesitated as though loath to advance such an improbable theory,—"unless it is the big fellows who are doing this for the purpose of scaring away the settlers."

Champion slowly shook his head. "No, I don't agree with you. It would take more than a newspaper story to scare a settler."

"Well, then, I give up," said Thorpe disconsolately. "If you boys can think of why the cattlemen would have the outside world think that we are rustlers and outlaws you can do better than I can."

Taciturn Nick Ray removed the pipe from his square jaws and spat deliberately into the fire. "It 'pears to me," he said quietly, "that the big fellers are plannin' a war on the rustlers—a big killin'—"

"But," broke in Thorpe, "there are no rustlers."

"You read what the paper said, didn't you?" retorted Ray.

"Do you mean to say that the big ranchmen intend to claim that the settlers in this valley are rustlers?—our neighbors?"

Ray nodded. "Looks like it, don't it? And you know them fellers ain't above it.

For an instant Thorpe's soul sickened at the thought, and then he laughed aloud.

"That might do, Nick, for a story in a book, or it might have been possible a few hundred years ago; but in this day and age it's preposterous—it's absurd," and still laughing Thorpe rose from his seat and went into the kitchen to eat his belated supper.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLAN.

In Denver, "Johnny" Parks's saloon is one of the sights,—or was, rather, at the time of which this story is written. Rare and costly marbles from Italy, mahogany from the tropics, pictures from celebrated studios in Europe, and bric-à-brac from goodness-knows-where, all combined to make the sumptuous barroom famous from coast to coast. To the Westerner it stood out in its garish magnificence a lurid instance of the wonderful creative power of wealth, and a fitting triumph of the master mind that designed it. A "palace" the local papers called it, and well they might, for within might be found an autocracy scarcely less elaborate than that maintained by the Grand Monarch himself.

Within this palace, Johnny Parks was King. Three shifts of Grand Dukes, arrayed in immaculate white, stood behind the priceless slab of mahogany and attended to the wants of the courtiers, while sundry Senegambians performed the more menial duty of cup-bearers to those who fain would be refreshed while they lolled at ease upon the richly upholstered divans at the rear of the room. Great men and respected were the Grand Dukes. They

boasted an acquaintance from Nogales to Deadwood. Senators and cowpunchers, millionaires and gamblers, they knew from Brownsville to Vancouver; state secrets, plots, feuds and intrigues were to them matters of everyday absorption. They were the confidants of the courtiers and never had they betrayed their trust.

Two functions were held in this Court each day —one in the afternoon and one in the evening. At each of these affairs the Monarch might be found in front of the bar—never behind it—where he acknowledged the homage of his vassals and graciously permitted the presentation of those ambitious creatures who so determinedly seek social preferment. Many men sought his favor; politicians craved his influence with voters, voters begged his good offices with politicians, and sycophants clustered around for no particular reason save that a sycophant must always find some one with whom to sycophantize. And yet withal, a bluff, boisterous, good-natured King he was.

It was into this scene of splendor that Captain Stanley strode one evening and glanced hurriedly through the crowd for certain men whom he expected to meet. "I'm too early," he said to himself, for no familiar face did he see, save that of the proprietor who, as a special mark of favor, was showing some of his art treasures to a tourist.

"Now that there pitcher," he was saying, as he

pointed to a landscape in oils, "I gets in Paree. I asts the feller what he wants fer it and he says, 'two thousand.' After I digs up and pays him, I finds out the cuss was talkin' monkey money and that I had paid him five times what he ast fer it—he was talkin' francs and I was talkin' dollars. However," he concluded, gazing admiringly at the picture, "she's worth it in my opinion, and I ain't no slouch at judgin' art, neither."

"No doubt," remarked the tourist dryly.

At that moment Mr. Parks caught sight of the new arrival. "Hello, Cap," he shouted, and leaving the tourist without ceremony he rushed upon Stanley and wrung his hand with good-natured violence. His acquaintance with the Captain harkened back many years—even back to the old troublesome days of Abilene, where he had made his start selling fiery whisky to cowboys who upon at least one occasion would have paid in bullets had it not have been for the old warrior's interference. "You old son-of-a-gun, you!" he exclaimed fondly. "You look jest the same as ever." And then with a grin he asked, "Where is the war?"

But the Captain was non-committal. He shook hands with the proprietor and the bartenders, bought a drink for all, and retired to the back room.

"I'm kinda layin' low," he explained.

Parks nodded his head understandingly. "All right," he chuckled, "I'm dumb as a oyster."

A few minutes later Mr. Shotgun Rawlins appeared. Under his arm Mr. Rawlins carried a package wrapped in an old newspaper, from the end of which two black tubes protruded ominously. Mr. Rawlins had another package which he carried elsewhere—in other words Mr. Rawlins was under the influence of liquor.

"Hello, Johnny! You ain't see ole Cap Stanley aroun' here, have you?" he inquired unsteadily.

Mr. Parks turned pale. For an instant he could see his beautiful barroom turned into a shambles. He knew that Stanley and Rawlins had been on opposite sides in the Lincoln county war, and he felt sure that for them to meet could only result in one thing.. Any trace of kingly dignity that might have lingered about the presence of the great man vanished instantly..

"Good God, Rawlins!" he exclaimed. "What are you doin' here?"

"Jes' a lil business," chuckled Mr. Rawlins, patting his parcel affectionately.

"Now don't you start nothin' in here, Rawlins," implored the proprietor. "Please go 'way."

At that instant the door of the back room opened and Captain Stanley stepped into the barrom.

"Go back!" shrieked Parks, and then with a violent lunge he wrenched the newspaper covered package from Rawlins's hand, whereupon that

individual fell back against the bar in a paroxysm of laughter. Mr. Parks was astounded.

"It's all right, Johnny," assured the Captain quietly. "He's workin' with me now."

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated the dazed Parks, wiping the cold perspiration from his brow. "The drinks are sure on me."

A little later when Mr. Wells-Fargo Finley entered, and after him Tex Allen and Ben Fraser, and then George Lee and Curley Farris, the proprietor experienced more thrills.

"Well, this beats me," he muttered. "There's goin' to be hell a-poppin' some place."

At the Captain's invitation they all withdrew to the spacious back room and ranged themselves about the table. Although much history could be written of that room, and many and queer were the conferences which it had sheltered, this reunion of fighting men was perhaps the strangest thing that had ever happened within its walls. It was a rare night. Anecdote followed anecdote; then there were some confidences of a political nature, for they all had some secret history to relate; and then came reminiscences of feuds and wars in which the men about the table had been on opposing sides. Up to this time Mr. Parks had, by adroitly turning the conversation at critical moments, rather enjoyed the evening; but now his anxiety that the topic might engender some bitterness and a consequence of he

dared not think what, became so marked that to most of the men it was highly amusing.

"What become of old Pete Forshee?" he inquired of Mr. Wells-Fargo Finley, in an endeavor to shift the topic to some safer subject.

"Who? Not Pulque Pete?"

"That's the feller," replied Mr. Parks, nodding energetically.

"Why, that old four-flush is chief case-keeper in Hi Butcher's place—that is, when he ain't sweepin' out or cleanin' up," explained Mr. Finley, with a laugh. "But say," he said, with sudden thought, "ain't you never heared 'bout Pete and his opry troop?"

No one had, and as Mr. Finley enjoyed the reputation of being a raconteur as well as a gun-artist, the company settled themselves comfortably to hear the story.

"Well," began Mr. Finley, "I was down to El Pas' a couple of months ago, an' while I was there a opry troop comes to town, an' then's when I meets Pete. Now this here outfit was none of yer cheap honkatonk affairs, but she was a big layout from New York on her way to the Coast. The pitchers they had up aroun' town was the finest you ever see, an' it wasn't no trouble to separate the boys from six bits to a dollar six bits fer a seat. It looked like the whole town turned out—for as I say the pitchers was sure fine. Well, I didn't have anything much

to do, so I sorter mosied over an' gits myself a seat."

"One of them six-bit ones?" inquired Mr. Rawlins, grinning.

"Naw," retorted Mr. Finley, disgustedly. "My seat was right under the gun."

"I knowed it, I knowed it," laughed Mr. Rawlins, delighted at his own keen perception.

"Well, anyhow," resumed Mr. Finley, "when the music starts up every seat in the house was took, an' men standin' up. Purty soon up goes the curtain, an' there was the grandest scene you ever see—sort of a plaza out in front of the court-house, an' a lot-a gals standin' aroun' singin' an' clinkin' wine glasses with each other an' havin' more dern fun than the boys after the beef round-up. An' them girls didn't have on none too many clothes, neither—they looked like they was dressed for a hot afternoon in Yuma." Here Mr. Finley closed his eyes in a dreamy retrospection. "Yes, it sure was fine," he averred.

"Then a likely lookin' girl comes out an' begins to sing 'bout how sorry she was 'bout havin' to marry some feller what has her pap's choice, not her'n; and from the way she took on 'bout it, I reckoned the old man must have picked out some rich greaser. You understand the show was different from anything you ever see—they was more kings an' queens an' things than what is in a deck of

kyards.. Well the gal hadn't sung more'n a few lines when in prances a galoot all in tights like a trapeze performer, an' he cuts in an' interrupts her so she has to stop. Say, but she looked mad! In 'bout a minute though she starts in agin' an' was jest a goin' right when this here feller busts in ag'in, and' then I hears some one in a box holler, '*Estate quieto!*' an' I looks aroun' an' there sets Pulque Pete as drunk as a biled owl."

"It wasn't necessary to say that Pete was drunk," remarked Mr. Parks. "Jest say that he was there."

"You are right 'bout that," agreed Mr. Finley. "I've knowed him fer ten year an' I ain't never saw him sober yit. But anyhow, there he sits—or lays or whatever you want to call it, fer he was a lollin' back in his chair, hat on, and laigs a danglin' over the side of the box same as if he was in some common honkatonk. You see Pete allows hisself to be some of a critic, and was a coachin' the show in Spanish, not wantin' to hurt the acters, feelin's by speaking right out in plain United States, which was funny 'cause the acters didn't sabe greaser-talk and the audience did.

"When Pete hollers out fer this feller to shut up, why, he did fer a minute an' the gal has 'nuther chanct, but it wasn't long 'fore he busts out ag'in an' I looks fer Pete to call him, fer the feller couldn't sing fer shucks, but then when I looks over in the

box I sees that Pete is as soun' asleep as the look-out on the swing shift. The only other play he makes durin' the show is when he gits to dreamin' an' falls out of his cheer, which makes a turrible noise and everybody laffs, but Pete gits up haughty an' proud-like, sets down, an' soon is 'sleep ag'in an' consequently don't give no more trouble.

"After the show lets out I runs across Pete in Hi Butcher's place an he tells me he is travelin' with the company. It seems that he cleans up 'bout two thousand playin' bank up at Denison, an' then he meets this here troop an' gits gone on one of the gals; then he comes along with them to Dallas, an' then to San Antone, an' then finally they arrives at El Pas'. He didn't have time to take more'n nine or ten drinks in Butcher's place 'cause he said he had to go an' feed a lot-a acters. He says that acters, an' especially female acters, 'peared to be hongry all the time. Pete was a cheerful provider fer the wimen folks, but he let the men acters rustle for their'n out on the range.

"'Come down to the feed lot,' he sez to me, 'an' I'll git one fer you.' Meanin' of course, a lady acter.

"Well, I didn't have no other place to go, so I jest trails along with 'im down to the Delmonico, which same is kept by a lot-a Chinks, an' there they all was a waitin' fer him as expectant as as many houn' pups at a hog killin'. I swear when Pete

comes in mos' of 'em begins to drool at the mouth. It was shore a sight—seventeen wimen an' Pulque Pete the big boss, jest as cool an' nacheral as Brigham Young at a family reunion.

"I seen Pete's gal, Marie somethin'—or—other was her name, an' she was a pore little thing what looked like she hadn't wintered well—didn't weigh a hundred poun', an' she was less than eight han's high. Pete gits her chum for me, but I didn't like mine. Edith Montmorency, or some such, was her name, but Pete calls her Eddie fer short. She was a broadish kind of a heifer, with a deep base voice, an' a complexion like a new Texas saddle,—kinda yallerish,—and she had a tolerable sprinklin' of whiskers, too. No, sir, I wanted one of them others, but Pete said it won't do to mix aroun'.

"Well, anyhow, we all has supper, an' then I sees why they like Pete so. Eat! My Lord! I've seen a Piute buck surround a biled dog an' a peck of grasshoppers, but he was jest a temptin' a jaded appetite compared with these here lady acters. Thirty-seven dollars was what Pete paid fer jest ham an' aigs an' dried apple-pie. But how they did love him! One lady acter says that he was '*so* liberal, an' jest perfectly *lovely*—if he *wasn't* so *rough.*' The men folks never comes aroun', an' I finds out that they is plumb scared to death. Well, you remember Pete *was* a hard lookin' customer! If there ever was a bad man fer *looks* it was Pete—

over six feet tall, voice like a bull, an' the fiercest lookin' mustache you ever see. There was a streak of yaller, though, in Pete a yard wide, but they didn't know it.

"The nex' mornin' the outfit gits on the train fer Phoenix, an' nothin' would do Pete but I must come along. Well, I didn't have nothin' else to do, an' I wanted to go up that way anyhow, so I joins the party. I feels kinda embarrassed with all them wimen, havin' never rid herd on more'n one before, but Pete says fer me to take everything free an' easy, fer he was runnin' things. They has a private car an' so we all gits aboard with our baggage—'cept Pete didn't have no baggage but a six-shooter an' three quarts of whisky, which last he declares is fer himself, personally, solely, and exclusive.

"After we gits started Pete takes a drink an' calls fer the foreman what has charge of the outfit. The foreman comes up prompt-like an' smilin', but I could see he don't feel none like smilin'. He was a right cute little Jew feller, an' I sees he's mos' skeered to death. Well, a Jew skinned me onct in Chicago—sold me a gold watch fer ten dollars, but it turns out to be a poor variety of brass an' the works I finds out to be jest a handful of carpet tacks—so I takes this little Jew out on the platform an' sez, 'I hope you don't have no trouble with my frien'.'

"'I won't,' he sez. 'Not fer a thousan' dollars.'

An' his teeth was a hummin' like a locust. 'Is he a bad man?' he asts me.

"'Bad man?' I sez. 'Why, he's killed more'n a hundred men—jest shoots 'em to see 'em kick; an' the handle of his six-shooter is that notched it looks like a buzz-saw.'

"Well, sir, the feller nearly falls to the floor, but jest then Pete begins to holler so he braces hisself up an' goes back in the car.

"'Mr. Liverworst,' sez Pete, 'I——'

"'Livinwitz is the name,' sez the Jew.

"'All right, Mr. Leavenworth,' sez Pete, 'I'm goin' to make some more changes.'

"'My God! Again!' moans the Jew. 'You'll ruin the show.'

"But to them remarks, Pete didn't pay no 'tention. He jest scratched his head kinda thoughtful-like an' sez, 'Yes, I'm goin' to make a lot more changes.'

"'You've nearly ruined the show already, Mr. Pete,' sez the Jew, lookin' like he's 'bout to cry.

"'Well,' sez Pete, frownin', it ain't my fault. That hoss-fiddle player tells me he kin sing, so I gives him a chanct; but he turned out wus than a four card straight open in the middle, so he goes back to fiddlin'.

"'Is that the change you are goin' to make?' asts the Jew, lookin' mighty relieved.

"'That's one of 'em,' sez Pete; 'but I am goin'

to make a lot more. What this here show needs,' he sez, talkin' slow an' tryin' to look wise, 'is more ginger—she's too slow. I've been calculatin' on addin' a good lively wind-up, an' I think a steer-ropin' contest or some spirited bronco-bustin' would tickle the crowd.'

"'My God, Mr. Pete!' sez the Jew. 'There ain't no stage in the world strong enough to stan' that—it 'ud bust down.'

"Well, Pete had to agree to that, but he shore did hate to give up the idee.

"'We got to do somethin' to liven her up,' he sez. 'I reckon a couple of hours of good, hard buck-dancin' is 'bout the thing.'

"The foreman likes to have a fit at this. He allows that the show is a high class opry, an' that buck-dancin' ain't no proper card to play, an' besides, he tells him, they ain't got no buck-dancers. My, but Pete was mad!

"'It looks like you ain't goin' to let me run this here outfit!' he roars.

"'I didn't mean no harm, Mr. Pete,' sez the Jew, shakin' like a leaf.

"'Well, I'll tell you some things I *am* a goin' to do,' sez Pete. 'I'm goin' to put Marie up in the front rank, an' then Eddie ain't had no chanct back there among the scenery, neither. Why,' sez he, 'you would think they was both deaf an' dumb—they ain't never peeped a word. Marie ain't been

doin' nothin' but make believe fillin' up them cups, an' actin' as a sort of a lady bartender, an' that ain't no fit occupation for no lady what *calls* herself a lady.'

"'What are you goin' to with her?' asts the Jew, pale as death.

"'Why make her the Queen, of course,' sez Pete, poundin' the arm of his seat, 'which she shore is!'

"'Oh, Mr. Pete!' yells the foreman, an' he buries his face in his han's.

"'What's the matter?' hollers Pete. 'Do you say she ain't no queen?' he asts, savage-like.

"'No, no,' sez the Jew, cryin'.

"'Well, I reckon you had better not,' sez Pete, settin' back in his seat.

"'But the clothes, Mr. Pete,' sez the Jew, 'they won't fit her. The Queen is twict as big a woman as Marie.'

"'Hell,' sez Pete. 'You jest cinch 'em up an' they'll fit her all right.'

"Well sir, I went out on the platform to laff. The thing was so funny I reckon I must have laffed fer a hundred miles, 'cause when I come back Pete was a startin' in on his second quart.

"'I believe I got a head fer this kind of business, Fargo,' he sez to me, 'an' I'll make a good show out of this here outfit yet,' sez he, 'if I got to act all the parts myself.'

"'Well, that remark gives me a idee, so I sez, 'Why *don't* you act a part, Pete?'

"'Do you think I'd do all right?' he asts, an' I could see that the proposition tickles him mightily.

"'Shore,' sez I. Why not?'

"He takes 'bout a half pint nip at the bottle an' sez, 'What part do think I orter play?'

"'There's only one part you're cut out fer,' sez I, 'an' you'd shore make good on that.'

"'What part is that?' he asts, tryin' to 'pear indifferent.

"I knowed what he wanted me to say, an' I said it: 'Why the king-part, of course. Ain't you a great big fine lookin' son-of-a-gun like a king orter be? That little runty short-horn what played the King last night don't look like no king an' you know it!'

"'Say, he was all on fire with the idee in a minute. He takes anuther drink, bangs his fist down on the seat, an' hollers out, 'I'll do it!' An' then he yells, 'Where's Liverwitz?' Well, that son of misfortune comes a-runnin', an' when Pete tells him he's goin' to play the King he faints dead away. When I brings him to with a dash of ice-water, he started fer the platform to jump off, sayin' that life was no longer dear. I feels kinda sorry fer the cuss, so I ketches him—besides I didn't want no suicide play 'cause it might bust up the troop, an'

I didn't want that to happen 'cause I was dyin' to see Pete act the King.

"'Look here!' I says to Levinwitz. 'Have some sense! You can make a barrel of money out of Pete.'

"Well, you orter see him perk up!

"'How?' he asts.

"'This way,' sez I. 'Everybody in Phoenix knows Pete, cause he used to live there. Now if he plays the King you can boost the ante to three dollars fer the best seats, an' a dollar four bits fer the cheapest—an' the house won't be big enough to hold the crowd.'

"When the proposition finally sinks through the bear's grease on his curly black hair an' gits into his think-box, he actually smiles some. 'I believe you are right,' he sez.

"So to make a long story short, at the next station we gits off the train an' telegraphs to Phoenix the glad tidings that Monsieur Pete Forshee, the famous Mojave basso, late of Denison, but formerly of Phoenix, would appear before his old friends in the leading rôle of 'King Zingzing.' Levinwitz had it put in the paper an' had the town billed, too.

"Then we goes back in the car to break Pete in fer the part. The King was asleep when we comes in, an' the Jew stan's back by the door like it was some grizzly bear asleep instead of a man, an' he asts me to wake his 'star' as he calls him. He

might have been a star, but he was that flushed an' red-faced he looks more like a sunset to me. Well, anyway, I kicks him on the shins an' he wakes up with a roar like a lion—then he sees me an' he lays down.

"'Wake up Pete,' sez I. 'You got-a learn yer part.'

"'I ain't got a do no such a dern thing,' he sez, kind-a irritated-like. 'I kin make it up as I go 'long—an' it will be a whole lot better than the regular stuff, too,' he sez.

"'But what about the others?' I asts him. 'How kin they foller your lead?'

"'Well, they got-a look out fer themselves,' he sez. 'That's *their* business.'

"The Jew foreman looks awful sad when he hears this.

"'Ain't you goin' to learn no songs?' I asts.

"'N-a-w,' he sez, scornful-like, 'I'll sing some of the old ones.'

"'Which ones?' I asts, not knowing Pete is a song-bird.

"'Why,' sez he, 'I'll sing:

> 'Lay his head upon the saddle,
> Place his gun upon his breast
> He's done said good-bye to Texas
> Fer there's a 'killer' gone to rest.

"Or,' sez he, 'I'll sing about:

The dirty little coward
That shot Mr. Howard
An' laid Jesse James in his grave.' "

Levinwitz motions me one side with tears in his eyes. 'If he sings them songs,' he sez, 'they'll lynch us all.'

"'No they won't,' I sez. 'They'll like it. You don't know Arizonie,' I tells him.

"Well, when we gits to Phoenix the nex' mornin', it looks like half the town was down to the station to meet us. Pete steps off the train all swelled up, an' drunk besides, an' all the fellers takes off their hats an' bows low an' calls him 'King.' Then Sam Dexter gits him in a open hack, drawd by four hosses, an' takes him aroun' town, stoppin', of course, only at the various saloons where everybody congratulates Pete 'bout enterin' the drama an' swells him generally an', of course, every five minutes they th'owed a drink into him. So when we gits him aroun' to the opry house that evenin', for I had took him away from Dexter, he was what you call 'paralyzed.' It takes three men to dress him, an' when they gits through he was a sight. His clothes was stretched over him as tight as a drum-head, cause the regular king was only 'bout half as big as Pete. His crown kept a fallin' off, too, so I gits a stick of sealing-wax an' melts it in Pete's hair, an' then I sets the crown on an' when the wax cools off she was as solid an' substantial as the cap-stone on a bridge-pier.

"When the curtain goes up the house was jamb full, an' the Jew foreman was pleased but skeered. But say, you orter seen Pete! He wasn't no bad man no more—he was jest the pitcher of a man skeered to death. The music fer his King song starts up an' he begins to look aroun' wild, like a man what's 'bout to be hung, an' I sees he's figurin' on makin' his git-away, so I sez, 'Now's the time, Pete. Go to it!'

"'I kain't,' he sez, as weak as a kitten. 'I kain't think of anything to say.'

"'It's easy,' I sez. 'Make it up as you go 'long.'

"'I kain't,' he whispers, cause his voice had left him.

"'Git out there an' sing 'bout the killer gone to rest, or 'bout Jesse James, or any of them opry songs,' I sez.

"'I kain't, I won't,' he mumbles, backin' up ag'in the wall.

"'Yes, you will,' sez I, 'fer I ast a lot-a them boys in the aujience to come an' I ain't agoin' to see 'em disappinted—besides you got a career in front of you.' And with that I gives him a push out onto the stage.

"'Well, you orter heared 'em yell when they sees Pete with all that riggin' on! For a minute he didn't 'pear to hear 'em, fer he was in a kind of a trance, but then he wakes up an' when he sees all that crowd he goes a chargin' acrost the stage like

one of them old long-horns at the San Antone stock yards. Sam Dexter was a standin' behind the scenery an' when he sees Pete a comin' he th'ows his gun down on him, an' I does the same when he comes back my way, an' so between us we has Pete a runnin' back and forth from one side of the stage to the other like a wild man. Meantime the fiddle players was a-sawin' away like mad on the King song, an' the aujience was ahollerin', 'Sing Pete! Sing, damn you, sing!'

"The first time Pete rushes acrost the stage he steps on one of Eddie's big, flat feet, an' when he makes the return trip he gits the other one; an' then when he comes back on the fust one ag'in, Eddie, bein' off her feed an' nacherally quick of temper, lets fly with one them snowshoes of her'n an' pore Pete goes a sailin' through the air as graceful as a buzzard, an' when he reaches his zenith, as a tenderfoot calls it, he reversees an' comes down straight as a arrer, head fust an' goes through the bass drum, a dead center shot.

"Well, sir, you jest orter heared that crowd! Yell? Well, I should say so! But Pete didn't wait to receive no congratulations. He jumps to his feet an' dashes out of the opry house, through the town, an' up Salt River towards the San Carlos reservation carryin' clost to four mile of barbed wire fence with him. The Apaches was hostile at that time an' some of the boys starts after him in-

tendin' to rope him, but as Pete was agoin' a little over forty mile an hour they never ketched him. He passed right through the hostile country an' when the Injuns sees him a comin', his kingly robes a streamin' out behind an' his crown a gleamin', they tears into Fort Wingate an' surrenders an' then lopes out fer the nearest mission.

"As fer Pete, they finally ropes him at Socorro. His robes was in tatters, but they tells me it takes three stone-cutters two days to remove that crown."

Mr. Parks arose and seized the narrator by the hand. "Fargo," he said, "you are a wonder. You—you," but words failed him. "What will you gents have?" he concluded weakly.

"Fargo," said Captain Stanly, and there was a trace of admiration in his voice, "without a doubt you are the biggest liar in seven states."

Mr. Finley grinned happily.

"It's the gospel truth," he protested.

The door opened suddenly and the tall figure of Hank Kennedy stood in the threshold.

"Come, men," he said briskly. "The special is waitin' for us in the yards."

As the men filed out into the crowded barroom there was a whoop of recognition and a storm of greetings. Mr. Parks could hardly believe his eyes. "The greatest aggregation ever under one canvas," he muttered, for in the room he saw nearly a hundred of the most desperate fighting men the West

has yet produced—men whose metal had been tried many times and never found wanting. There were grim, saturnine-faced men who tossed off their drinks quietly and without words; and there were hilarious younger men, some hardly out of their teens, who greeted each other with a boisterous good nature, pounded upon the bar to emphasize their slightest remark, and swaggered about to the vast admiration of the bartenders; and a few there were who laughed incessantly and whose ruddy countenances shone with the joyous anticipation of as many schoolboys off for the holidays.

The Captain glanced over his company approvingly. "Come boys," he said, "we must be going."

And then after a final drink and handshake with the admiring Mr. Parks, the crowd silently followed their leader down the street, and a few minutes later a special train with darkened windows was clattering over the switches, on its way to the Hole-in-the-Wall country.. The crusade had started.

CHAPTER XX.

NATE AS AN ATTESTING WITNESS.

THORPE was somewhat disappointed after he had scrutinized the will of the late William Sawyer, which the obliging district clerk had placed before him. It was tersely drawn, its purpose was clearly expressed, and the young man saw almost at a glance that there could be no controversy as to the intent of the testator. He read again the three short sentences which fixed the distribution of the estate:

"To my daughter, Cora Elizabeth Sawyer, who has forsaken her home and whom I believe to be dead, I give nothing.

To my niece, Helen D. Sawyer, I bequeath the sum of one dollar.

To my beloved nephew, Algernon Alfred Hall, I bequeath and devise all the remainder of my estate, both real and personal, of every kind whatsoever."

At the bottom of the page was the signatures of the testator and that of the witnesses, William Forbes, Nate Champion, and Beriah, better known as Bud, Bradley,—he of the protracted inebriation.

Thorpe returned the document to the clerk and

walked out of the court-house. All the way back to the ranch he pondered over the strange miscarriage of justice which had doubled the fortune of A. Alfred Hall. Strange indeed are the ways of the makers of wills! By every right and every parental obligation the estate, or at least a part of it, should have been left to the daughter, Cora Sawyer. But more inexplicable still was that strange perversion of fairness by which the old man had left his possessions to the rich nephew and had disregarded the niece who was dependent upon her own efforts for her support. And a great wrong like this one was not an exceptional case, a thing that Thorpe knew full well, for in his legal experience he had noted many such deflections.

"The instrument is perfectly drawn," he said to himself; "it is properly executed; and its authenticity cannot be questioned. The only remaining thing I can do is to inquire into the saneness of the testator."

It was after supper that evening that he began this investigation, and it was the same evening that it ended.

"Nate, did old man Sawyer have good common sense and reasonably sound judgment?" he asked.

Champion laughed softly to himself before answering.

"Well," he began, by way of reply, "they tells me that the old man starts from Texas with only

a hundred head of stock, that he sells two hundred and fifty on the way, and that he gits here with two hundred. He wasn't crazy so you could notice it—not exactly. No, you couldn't even call him absent minded."

"How was he at the time he made his will?"

"His noodle was as sound as a dollar."

"Well, do you know any one that thought that the old man's intellect was not as bright as it might be?" persisted Thorpe, in a last effort to find some evidence.

"Dave Martin did onct," chuckled Nate, "when the old man raised him out of his boots with three fours showin', and Martin havin' three aces and a five spot in sight and anuther five in the hole. Yes, he sure did. But the old man had the case four buried, and Dave's done changed his mind."

It was evident that local opinion could not be relied upon to establish a lack of sanity in the deceased, and with this last hope gone Thorpe acknowledged himself beaten.

"How did you happen to be a witness to the will, Nate?" he asked carelessly.

Champion thoughtfully scratched his head. "Me witness a will?"

"Yes, you signed a paper for the old man. Don't you remember?"

"When was it?—about a year ago?"

"Yes. January the third, last year."

"Oh, I remember now! You see it was like this," he explained: "Bud Bradley was havin' the 'jumps' that afternoon, not havin' had a drink for nearly a hour, and I takes him into the Last Chance and buys him about five fingers of that mule-whisky what they keep there—you see Bud takes such a awful big drink that Fidler won't stand for him no more over to his place—and so we was jes' comin' out when I sees old man Sawyer stick his head out of Bill Forbes's winder and let out a whoop. Well, I knowed the old man had quit drinkin', otherwise I wouldn't have paid no 'tention, of course; but when I hears that whoop I jes nacherally concludes that he is gittin' scalped, so me and Bud rushes over.

"You see the old man always was a kind a impatient cuss, so when Forbes gits the papers drawed and says he'll go out and git some witnesses, the old man says he can git 'em quicker, so he raises the winder, sticks out his head, and lets out a yawp that you could hear ten mile. Well, most everybody in town, not knowin' what's the matter, comes chargin' up—me and Bud 'mong the rest—and then the old man hollers out that all he wants is two witnesses. Say you never see a crowd so disgusted. They all left but Bud and me, and we stayed and signed up."

"It was rather a queer way of summoning witnesses," smiled Thorpe.

"Yes," agreed Nate," it was sure funny. But the funniest part," he went on, "was when Bud was a tryin' to sign. Bud's hand was a shakin' like he was scramblin' aigs, and he grabs that pen with both hands like he was tryin' to choke it. I laffed 'till I thought I'd bust; but the ole man got as mad as a hornet, and he got to cussin' which didn't help Bud none cause he was plenty nervous anyway. When Bud got through it would take a Philadelphia lawyer to tell whether it was a name or a cowbrand. And then to make matters worse he drops a big dab of ink right under where he had signed and 'fore anyone could stop him he tries to rub it out with his thumb.

"Well, I wisht you could-a heard the old man! He certainly did go some! The cussin' he gives pore Bud was art—yes sir, pure art. Forbes finally got the ole man quieted down by tellin' him that two witnesses is enough, so he signs the thing hisself."

You make a good story out of it, Nate," observed Thorpe laughingly," and I hate to spoil it by being one of those justly detested 'eye-witnesses,' but I examined the will this morning and Bradley's signature is quite legible and there is no blot on it."

"I'm a tellin' you the frozen truth," insisted Champion.

"But I examined the will very carefully, and only a few hours ago."

"If it ain't like I tell you, then you was lookin' at somethin' else," and there was a trace of irritation in Champion's voice, for like all raconteurs he resented having a good story spoiled by a mere detail.

For a moment Thorpe was silent for a startling conjecture was flashing through his brain.

"Nate," he said slowly, "if what you have told me is true, then the will that I saw this morning must be fraudulent."

"It sure must," declared Champion, coolly lighting his pipe, "if it ain't jes like I describe it."

"We must go to town and look at it to-morrow. The affair begins to look like a conspiracy to me," added Thorpe, after a moment's thought; "and the man who profits the most, Hall, would naturally be the villain. He must have had some help, too. Most probably his lawyer, Forbes, was in on the deal."

"Well, I don't know 'bout Hall," broke in Ray, who had sat quietly listening to the conversation, "but in my opinion there ain't a bigger rascal unhung than Bill Forbes."

For an hour or more Thorpe went over Champion's story. He searched into every detail and cross-questioned him untiringly, but Nate was firm and decided in all his answers and in the end

Thorpe was more firmly convinced than ever. That night he slept but little, for the disclosure that Champion had made excited him. As he lay fitfully tossing in his bunk there streamed through his restless brain all the incidents that had happened him and the faces of those who had played a part in them. He saw Tom Horn in the dance-hall, he once more was with the fascinating woman in the cottage with the green blinds, and then his fancy turned to Helen Sawyer and her indignation at Hall's insulting reply when he had tried to borrow a horse at the W. S. ranch. At this last thought the young man's lips hardened into a grim smile of vengeance, for there was little of the turning-of-the-other-cheek-spirit in John Thorpe's make-up. "I'll put that scoundrel in the penitentiary," he promised himself, and with this resolution he went to sleep.

The next afternoon saw the pair in town. They had ridden hard, for Thorpe was anxious for the test, and even Nate, to whom all such matters were surrounded in mystery, had begun to show some enthusiasm.

"Now Nate," directed his employer, "we must proceed quietly and with secrecy. I'll go in first and look at the document, and then you come in on some pretext or another and I'll hold the paper up so you can see the signatures. Then I'll meet you

outside and you can tell me if they are genuine or not."

Champion nodded. "You are purty slick at this kinda business," he commented admiringly.

A few minutes later and Thorpe was again examining the last will and testament of William Sawyer. As he saw Champion enter he held the document up so it could be better seen, and as he did so he saw a water-mark in the paper. He observed this carefully for he had not noticed it before. "Jaybird" was the legend and immediately under this trade-mark name was the outline of a bird.

"You ain't seen Doc Richards around here, have you?" inquired Champion of the clerk.

"No, I ain't" ungrammatically replied that individual.

Champion glanced carelessly over Thorpe's shoulder for an instant, and then turning on his heel walked out of the building.

It was with difficulty that Thorpe restrained himself. His almost overpowering impulse was to rush madly after Champion and hear the all-important verdict.

He waited a few moments, folded the paper, returned it to the clerk, and after thanking him, strode out as slowly as his impatient nature would allow.

Nate was waiting outside the door.

"Well?" questioned Thorpe breathlessly.

Champion told the story in one word: "Bogus!"

Thorpe grasped his hand triumphantly. "I was sure of it!" he exclaimed.

"Why," remarked Nate disgustedly, "Bud Bradley couldn't write as straight as what is on that paper with a civil engineer a guidin' his pen! —or me, neither," he added with a grin.

"And now to find the original!" cried Thorpe enthusiastically. He checked himself suddenly and then more soberly he added, "But of course that is impossible for they have destroyed it."

"No, they ain't," interrupted Nate.

"Why?—Why didn't they?"

"Cause the old man handed it to me."

"Handed it to you?" exclaimed Thorpe. "Why the devil didn't you tell me of this before?"

"I ain't never thought of it 'till now."

"Well, where is it?" demanded Thorpe feverishly. "What did you do with it?"

"I—I disremember," confessed Nate sheepishly.

"You disremember! Good Lord, man, think!—think!"

"I am thinkin'," savagely retorted Champion. "Don't crowd me! How in hell kin I think with you a pawin' all over me?" and the big man mopped his perspiring brow with a desperate energy. "Let's see," he muttered. "The ole man hands me the paper—it was in a long blue envelope

—and says—and says—what in hell was it he says? Oh yes, now I recollect!" and he turned to Thorpe with a relieved and smiling countenance. "He says: 'Take this down and put it in the bank.'"

"Good!" ejaculated Thorpe. "And you did?"

"I ain't sure," answered Nate sadly, his face clouding again. "Damn it! It's been over a year since it happened." And then after some minutes of the most intense mental labor, during which time his features were twisted and contorted in a truly horrible manner, he turned suddenly to his employer with: "Wasn't that the day that Doc Richards got the accordion that he sent away to Chicago for?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Thorpe, smiling in spite of himself.

"Yes, that was the day that Doc got her," said Nate, answering his own query, "—and she was a hummer too. She was the biggest one you ever see —had a hundred triggers or more, and was shiny all over with brass. She opened out over six foot wide and could make more noise than a saw-mill. Doc could play Old Dan Tucker on her plumb th'ough 'thout pumpin' her but onct. I never see such a——"

"I know, I know," interrupted Thorpe exasperatedly, "But the paper—what did you do with it?"

"I'm goin' to *tell* you if you'll only give me a chanct," retorted Nate heatedly.

Thorpe sighed resignedly. "Well, go on then," he said.

"Well, as I was sayin' 'fore you interrupted me," continued Champion, "Doc gits this here accordion and I was plumb crazy to hear it, so when the ole man gives me the paper and tells me to put it in the bank, I jes' stuck it in my pocket calculatin' to git aroun' to the bank later cause I jes' *had* to hear that there accordion first. Well, I went over to the livery stable and Doc greased up the machine and starts to play—and say, maybe you think he can't go some!"

"Well?" interjected Thorpe impatiently.

"The upshot of it was," continued Nate, "that I clean forgits to take the paper to the bank and I never thinks of it 'till after supper, and when I goes up there the bank was locked up. I was goin' out of town that night so I gives it to Uncle Billy and tells him to put it in the bank, which he promised to do—and that is all I know about it."

"If it is in the bank," said Thorpe, breathing a sigh of relief, it is safe. We will go up and see."

But alas! an inquiry of the cashier and his solitary assistant disclosed the disappointing fact that Uncle Billy and the long blue envelope had not been seen.

"Mr. Forbes has made the same inquiry," remarked the cashier casually. "Neither myself nor the clerk can recall any such envelope such as you

and Forbes describe, but to be sure we have made a thorough search."

When they reached the sidewalk Thorpe slapped his companion joyfully on the back. "Nate, old boy," he said jubilantly, "the original has not been destroyed for Forbes has been looking for it. He evidently don't know that the old man gave it to you. Now we will find Uncle Billy and the mystery will be solved."

But fate had decreed otherwise, for at the Capitol saloon they learned that Uncle Billy had departed in quest of "the big game."

Somewhere in the broad West there was being waged that desperate battle known as "the big game;" and there was the adventurous Uncle Billy. Where, no one knew, for a fleeting and illusive thing is the big game. To-day it may be in Denver and to-morrow in Butte or New Orleans or in Deadwood or in San Francisco or Helena or Salt Lake, or perhaps for the moment it might be found in some of the smaller mining towns such as Leadville, Virginia City or Silverton. By what strange occult power Uncle Billy kept informed of its whereabouts no one knew. But they did know that after every fortunate winning the old man departed with his stake, as straight and with as an unerring instinct as a homing pigeon for—"the big game."

CHAPTER XXI

EVIDENCE

UNCLE BILLY's disappearance was disheartening. At the hotel they learned that the old man had given up his room and departed with all his worldly possessions, the same being encompassed in one rather small valise of unknown antiquity.

Thorpe sighed. "If he were only here," he said, "the mystery could be solved in a minute."

"He'll come back as soon as he gits trimmed," consoled Nate,—"he always does. And until then there ain't nothin' to do but wait."

But Thorpe did not intend to remain idle until the return of the wandering gamester. There yet remained the slender clue of the water-marked paper and he determined to trace it down.

"Nate," he said, "I am not going back to the ranch until I have accomplished something."

The big cowboy looked at his employer admiringly for a moment and then exclaimed: "And by thunder, Kid, I'm goin' to help you!"

Just how he was to accomplish this Champion had not the slightest idea, so in his dilemma he repaired hastily to the Capitol saloon for inspiration.

Thorpe smiled as he watched the retreating figure and he wondered what Champion could do to help him. Then throwing himself into one of the hotel chairs, he, undisturbed by the noise of the roulette ball, the clinking of money, and the rattle of chips, thought over the clew of the water-mark.

An hour later he abruptly arose and walked briskly down to Doc Jeffries's drug-store.

"I want some writing paper," he said to the clerk. "A good grade if you please."

The clerk opened a box and placed it upon the counter, and Thorpe took a sheet and held it before the light—it had no mark.

"It's too thick," he said.

A half dozen other boxes were displayed, but Thorpe under various pretexts refused them all

"I'm dogged if you ain't a particular feller," remarked the clerk with western frankness.

"It isn't me," returned Thorpe, leaning over the counter confidentlally, "it's the Judge. You see I want to draw up a legal document."

"O," said the clerk, knowingly, "I had some of that there kind, but Bill Forbes took all I had. Yes, here is the box, but it is empty."

On the end of the box Thorpe eagerly read: "Blue Jay. The Northern Paper Co., Appleton, Wis."

"Whom do you buy your paper of?" he asked.

"Well, this here bunch," replied the clerk, "we

got from a new concern in Cheyenne,—Brooks and Company."

"You say it is a new concern?"

"Yes. Jest started up about six months ago. Their drummer ain't made but one trip up here."

"And yet," thought Thorpe, "the will is dated over a year ago."

"With ill-concealed satisfaction he left an order for a box of the paper and departed hastily for the telegraph office.

The town of Buffalo is connected with the outside world by one of those flimsy filaments contemptuously dubbed by the haughty operators at water-tank stations along the railroads, as "punkin-vines." For some miles out of Casper the punkin-vine consisted of the uppermost strand of the barb-wire fence, and from there on it staggered its uncertain way over the hills on poles scarcely larger than a man's wrist. Save when the cattle broke down the fence, or the wind blew down the poles, or the festive cowpuncher shoot off the insulators,—which was almost all the time,—the line was in working order. Marvelous to relate, the line had been in operation without a break for the record period of four days, and Thorpe sent the following message:

Buffalo, Wyo.

Northern Paper Co.,
Appleton, Wis.

How long has Jay Bird paper been on the market?
Answer my expense. *John T. Thorpe.*

"A pretty good afternoon's business," he muttered, as he retraced his footsteps back to the hotel. "I rather think I have set a mark for my assistant sleuth, Mr. Champion."

But Nate had not been idle. When he left Thorpe he had some vague idea of searching out Bill Forbes or "A. Alfred", as Hall was becoming to be known, and by the most direct and simple of expedients—that of "bending a six-shooter" over their heads—secure a confession which would clear up matters at once. Fortunately for themselves, however, neither of those gentlemen could be found, and he was reluctantly forced to abandon the plan. In the Capitol he found Dutch Cooper, and then it was that he decided to forego methods of violence and to take upon himself the cunning of a fox. Just why he should adopt this guise Nate did not know, for Cooper would have cheerfully divulged any information within his knowledge; it was, perhaps, but an evidence of that love of the mysterious that psychologists tell us lies dormant in the breast of every man and which manifests itself at times by an unnatural craftiness and a desire to make the most simple of investigations by ways most devious and roundabout. It has been observed by many eminent bartender-psychologists, that spirituous liquor induces this phenomenon to a marked degree.

"Cooper," said Nate, "what'll you have to

drink?" which hospitable inquiry was but the first of a long, mutual questioning of a similar kind.

Some ten hours later at his room at the hotel as Thorpe was about to retire, there was a knock at the door and opening it he was surprised to find Nate and his quarry, Dutch Cooper.

"I brought him to bed," explained Cooper, somewhat thickly. "He's purty tired."

Behind Cooper's back, Nate, after a prodigious effort, winked.

Thorpe was mystified.

"Come in, boys," he said. "Have seats," and he waved them to the only two chairs in the room, while he himself sat upon the bed.

As Cooper sank heavily down in his seat, Nate leaned forward and whispered hoarsely, "I got him full so's he'd talk."

Thorpe grinned, and Champion as though he divined his thought exclaimed: "*I'm* sober as a jedge." Whereat Mr. Cooper laughed long and hilariously.

Nate seated himself carefully in the rocking chair and then after another laborious wink to Thorpe, directed: "Now, Dutch, go on and tell it."

Without further urging Cooper began: "It was like this," he began, "ole Doc Richards owns the pony, a buckskin 'bout ten han's high, *an'*, as I says, she was the bes' cow-pony in the state. 'What'll you take fer her?' sez I. 'What'll you give?' sez Doc.

'What'll you take' sez he. 'What'll you take?' sez I. ''What'll——' "

"No, Dutch. That ain't the story I mean, interrupted Nate.

But Cooper refused to be diverted. "'What'll you give?' sez he. Well, sir, the upshot of the the whole business was that I buys that there mare fer twenty dollars an' a good ivory-handled six-shooter. Speakin' of six-shooters did you ever notice what a turrible difference ther is in 'em? Of course there ain't but one sure 'nough six-shooter an' that's a Colt's—some folks got a different idee though—which remin's me of a funny thing what happened down to Cheyenne onct. I was a settin' in a poker game with old Cockeye Miller—you remember ole Cockeye—used to be marshal at Ogalalla back in the early eighties—they say he got crossed up tryin' to watch them two Wyatt boys both at the same time—them Wyatts was sutinly low down cusses if there ever was—ole Cockeye got 'em both though—one with each barrel of a shotgun——"

Thorpe coughed uneasily, but Nate shook his head. "Don't try to head him," he whispered, "'cause you cain't do it. I've tried it. He jes' bows his neck, lays back his years, and goes on through."

"An' as I sez," rambled on Cooper, "I was a settin' in this here game with ole Cockeye an' anuther sport, a Chicago tinhorn. 'Ante up,' sez

ole Cockeye at me, though one of them eyes of his'n was slanted over t'wards this here Chicago gent. Well, sir, that sport bein' loser in the game, an' havin' never been gentled none, comes back at ole Cockeye right sassy-like. Well, then, ole Cockeye gits some personal—he sutinly tells that Chicago feller a few things. He gives him a good all-aroun' cussin' an' then announces he's goin' to jump the game. That was too much for this here tinhorn feller to stan', cause Cockeye was not only takin' out 'bout a thousand dollars, but he was a bustin' up a game which was less than three days old. 'You're goin' to jump the game on me, are you!' yells Mr. Chicago, an' with that he reaches back fer his six-shooter.

"But shucks! ole Cockeye was too old a bird. He wasn't marshall of Ogalalla fer nothin'! He jes' reaches under the table an' pulls out about four poun' of Mr. Colt's best steel an' combs that Chicago sets—jes' onct. You see when ever ole Cockeye sets in a game he always sticks his gun in the waist ban' of his britches, so of course that there Chicago feller never had no chanct from the start. When he gits this here slam on the head it jes' rings like a gourd, an' he falls back in his cheer,—senseless. Cockeye don't even look at him; he laffs a little, cashes in his checks, an' gits up from the table whistlin' a tune. He starts to walk out of the house, but at the door he stops, turns aroun', and

comes back. 'I reckon I'll relieve this here gent of his weapon,' he sez, with a grin, ''cause when he comes to, he might git foolish.'

"Then when he pulls the feller's gun from his pocket I wisht you could-a seen it! I'll herd sheep if he didn't have one of them four-bit, pot metal, double-action jimcracks, like niggers carry down South! And then I wisht you could-a seen ole Cockeye! Mad? He sutinly was. He wouldn't have kicked none on gittin' plugged decent-like, with a regular six-shooter; but to be shot up with one of them pot-iron nigger pistols! Nacherally he feels the disgrace, an' it take three of us to hold him while some of the boys grabs the other feller an' hides him out."

"No, that ain't the one, Dutch," protested Nate, at the same time yawning loudly, "that ain't the story."

"Which reminds me," continued Cooper, calmly, of a feller what used to cook fer the TY outfit up in Montana. Of course a cook always puts on more airs than a Justice of the Peace, but this here feller was sure the limit. He wasn't perticular none of the kind of six-shooters he packs, or the kind anybody else lugged, but he did have his weakness on one thing, and that was bakin' powder. Yes sir, he was the greatest expert on bakin' powder in the world, I reckon. He knew more bran's on a tin can than a good cow-man does on a steer. I

remembers one time when we was out on the spring round-up an' we runs out of the stuff. The foreman was fer sendin' in one of the boys to Forest City only 'bout forty mile away, but this here cook allows he ain't goin' to make no biscuits with any doggoned, rim-fire bakin' powder—he's got to have a certain kin' what can only be bought in Missouia a hundred an' fifty mile from camp. Well sir, the foreman he cussed an' swore, but the cook stood pat—he was a good cook, but he has his prejudices. It looks like the only thing to do was to go fetch, but jes' then one of the boys gits a idee. He talks it over with the foreman an' the upshot of it was that they steals one of the empty cans an' rides over to the alkali flat an' that night they comes back with as purty a can of bakin' powder as you ever see. The nex' mornin', as the cook goes a grumblin' an' a pawin' through the chuck box, he finds this here can of his fav-o-rite biscuit raiser. He can't understan' how he happens to overlook it before, but anyway it makes him happy right off, an' so he gits busy.

"The biscuits he had a waitin' fer us that noon was the purtiest you ever see. I takes a bite of one an' the skin all comes off the roof of my mouth an' the water runs out of my eyes like I's cryin'. It affects all the other boys the same way an' they tries to git the feller to reduce his charge some, but he allows he's been loadin' biscuits fer twenty year

an' that he knowed his business, an' so jes' to show the boys that they was wrong he eats the whole batch hisself. The next day we buries him,—which only goes to show how bull-headed some fellers is when they gits stuck on a name.

"Now ole man Sawyer was different—looks like names sets the ole man crazy, that is some kine of names. I see him send back a whole wagon load of canned goods onct, 'cause they was branded 'Sweet William'. He sends word back to ole man Foote that if he ever sends out any more such derned canned foolishness he'd come to town an' knock his head off—an' he sure would, fer the ole man never did four-flush none. That remin's me of one time when the ole man gits a letter from that feller what's out to the ranch, A. Alfred."

Thorpe felt a warning pressure on his foot and looking up saw Champion winking violently. "Now it's a comin'," he whispered.

"The letter didn't say nothin' in perticular," reminisced Cooper,—"jes' kind-a called the ole man's 'tention to how much he was loved by his admirin' nephew, an' kind-a hunchin' the ole man to put a bet on fer him when he goes to make his will. I read it out loud, fer the ole man's eyesight was gittin' bad, an' it was sure sugar coated an' honey flavored. The ole man don't say much as I reads,—jes' kind-a grunts at them lovin' messages, —but when I comes to the signature, which was A.

Alfred Hall, you orter seen him! He jes' riz right up on his hin' laigs an' fanned the air! He declares right then an' there that a feller what'll part his name in the middle will suck aigs. And say how he did call the turn! If there ever was fish-blooded cross between a frog an' a lizard, it's this here same party, A. Alfred."

Thorpe was wide awake now and was listening to the man with eager attention.

"Well sir, the ole man had me hitch up the buckboard instanter an' we sets out fer town on the lope, an' all the way he was jes' makin' the air blue. He tells me he's got no heirs but a niece an' a nephew, an' that he ain't never seen neither of 'em. He sez that he don't know nothin' 'bout the niece, but that he wouldn't give hell-room fer this feller A. Alfred, so he's goin' to town to fix up a will in which he's goin' to play his entire stack on the niece."

"When was that?" demanded Thorpe, rising from his seat in his excitement.

"'Bout a year ago."

"Did he ever change his mind as to how he would leave his estate?"

"Who? Him? Why the ole man never changed his min' in his life! I remembers onct as how he started out to play the high-card up at Fidler's. Uncle Billy was dealin' with them shaky fingers of his'n, an' derned if it didn't come low nine times

straught han' runnin', an' on top of that she comes splits twict. The ole man never quit though—it jes' made him madder. He started out to play the high-card an' dogged if he didn't! He has the limit taken off an' then what he does to Billy Fidler's bank is a plenty. She comes out high five times in succession, which same makes Uncle Billy turn over the box. Speakin' of playin' bank, I knowed a feller onct named Wheeler—he was a curious kind of a cuss—one of them thin-bellied, long-legged Arkansaw fellers—he used to play—to play—to play——"

The words came slower and slower and finally ended with a snore.

"Well," said Nate, with a sigh of relief, "he finally told it. I knowed he would if we didn't crowd him none." For a moment he gazed at the sleeping man with leaden eyes and then remarked sententiously, "That there Cooper has got a capacity like a rain bar'll." And with the utterance of this remark the big man's chin sank lower and lower upon his breast and soon his deep breathing merged into the heavy snores of his friend, Dutch Cooper.

After securing a room for the two men and seeing them safely abed, Thorpe sat up and smoked his pipe as he thought over the crowded incidents of the day. The evidence had accumulated with starting rapidly: the testimony of Champion; the

water-mark; the statement of the drug-clerk; Cooper's story; all of these Thorpe placed in that exact sequence with which a legal mind arrays the facts.

"It has been a wonderful day," he said aloud. And then as though the words were the signal for his evidence to be clinched beyond the possibility of a doubt, there came a rap at the door and then without waiting for an invitation Cal Fuller, storekeeper, postmaster, express agent, and telegraph operator, breathless with excitement stepped into the room.

"The punkin-vine sure made a record fer herself to-day," he declared, at the same time handing Thorpe a message. "Yes sir, she sends a message and gits a reply the same day."

Thorpe hastily tore open the yellow envelope and read:

Appleton, Wis.

John T. Thorpe,
Buffalo, Wyo.

Blue Jay first placed on the market March this year. Send all orders to Brooks and Co., agents, Cheyenne.

Northern Paper Co.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WAY OF A WOMAN.

At noon the next day, Thorpe found a solitary letter in his postoffice box. Even as he peered through the little glass window he recognized the square, blue envelope and the strong, slanting writing upon its face.

"'The light and the dark woman,'" he murmured smiling as he recalled Harper's allusion to the palmist's prophecy.

The note was short:

Dear John:—I must see you at once. When you get this, come to the house. Important.

Cora Sands.

"I suppose she is anxious to know about her case," he said to himself; "and now it is my duty to break the news to her. Women are hard losers and it will be a nasty scene," he added, with a grimace.

As he thrust the letter into his pocket, a vague, indistinct determination formed itself in his mind that he would be guilty of no undignified and unseemly haste, notwithstanding the imperative

nature of the epistle—"the next day will do," he told himself. And yet within the hour, as though drawn by some irresistible force, he found himself upon the side street behind the postoffice, and almost before he knew it he was mounting the steps of the cottage with the green blinds.

As before he had not the opportunity to knock, for hardly had he reached the uppermost step when the door was opened and Cora Sands with a radiant smile bade him enter. As he stood for a moment on the threshold he was dimly conscious that the woman appeared more beautiful to him than ever before.

"I see that you have received my note, John," she said, and there was a happy little inflection in her voice that did not escape him. "But then," she added, with a pretended pout, "you never come except by special invitation."

She made no pretense at seating him, but stood, still holding his hand with the cordial grasp with which she had welcomed him. As the wonderful gray eyes gazed questioningly into his, he felt awkward and ill at ease. Her lips were still pursed bewitchingly and the color was slowly mantling her cheek. It was a critical moment. Vaguely he noted the sweeping contour of her splendid figure; and then the swelling outline of her throat where a turquoise brooch mesmerically interposed a single

dash of color between the glorious yellow hair and the wide sweep of her white shoulders.

For an instant he wavered. Then suddenly, as in a vision, he saw the reproachful brown eyes of Helen Sawyer, and with a superhuman effort he wrenched himself aside and with a calmness that belied his feelings strode past the woman and seated himself in a chair beside the hearth.

"I've been busy," he explained, clearing his throat. "I've been busy, or I would have called before."

"Always cold business, John," she commented.

"Not at all," he protested. "But you know the old adage: 'Business before pleasure.'"

"That's the oldest of the four thousand known excuses, John," she laughed. "Do be original."

"Truly," he insisted, "I have been busy on your will case. My first duty is to my client."

"Well then," she retorted, "it is your client's imperative orders that she be not neglected socially. But you are such a conscientious fellow," she added seriously, "that I suppose you must unload your mind of its legal burden before we can have a chat on lighter subjects. Now what have you found out?"

"I've found out," replied Thorpe slowly, "beyond the shadow of a doubt that the will filed by Hall is spurious,—a forgery."

"Good!" exclaimed the woman. "And so

there is no will at all?" she inquired joyously. "John it will make me very rich," she went on, not waiting for a reply. "My father was worth over a million when he died. Why," and she laughed happily, "I can afford a Prince or a Duke as you suggested."

He realized that the time had come when the truth must be told. It was an unpleasant duty, and he prepared himself for the ordeal that he felt was to come. Other scenes within his experience as a lawyer crowded his memory. He recalled the criminations and recriminations of tearful but avaricious claimants to other estates, and he thought of the family feuds, jealousies, and bitter hatred engendered by real or fancied partiality in the distributions. And they were all comparatively small affairs.

The woman was seated beside him, her elbow resting upon the arm of his chair, and when he took her hand sympathetically into his own he saw her cheek crimson,—not with modesty, but pleasure.

"Unfortunately for you," he began, "there is another will."

"Unfortunately for me?"

"Yes, unfortunately for you. If there were no other will, the estate would go to you by descent. As it is—," he hesitated for a moment—"you get nothing."

"Well John," and the woman was astonishingly

cheerful, "I don't care a great deal. You remember that I told you at the outset that I would abide by my father's wishes in the matter."

The woman amazed him.

"It means a great loss to you," he said, with a voice that was meant to be sympathetic.

"Oh," she responded, "I haven't lost anything, for I've never had it. And then besides," she added with a smile, "I have enough to make one reasonably happy without it."

For a moment John Thorpe stared at the woman unbelievingly; and then there surged over him a strange feeling of a sudden and fierce admiration. "You are a wonder!" he exclaimed. "You certainly are a good sport! I am going to kiss you!" he declared, and with that he drew her to him.

The woman did not resist—she met his embrace half way. Thorpe felt the soft arms about his neck; felt the ardent pressure of her lips—and was lost.

At last he released her, and as she sank back in her chair he saw a new light in the woman's eyes, and he knew what it meant for he had seen it in womens' eyes before.

"John," she said, half laughingly, "I wondered how long it would take you."

"Have I been slow?" he challenged.

Her answer was a caress.

"If our friend, Mr. Horn, could see us now," he

remarked teasingly, "no doubt he would be highly gratified."

"Now John," she retorted, "that was unfair. Tom Horn belongs to my past—he's gone out of my life forever. See here," and she pulled a letter from the bosom of her dress, "I'll convince you. Read it!" and she tossed it contemptuously into his lap. "That's why I sent for you—to show you that letter."

Other mens' letters, however, did not interest Thorpe, and so he laid it quietly upon the table beside him, saying, "I haven't finished my report upon your case."

The evasion was plain and a frown clouded the woman's brow for an instant. "Oh well!" she exclaimed petulantly, "finish it and for heaven's sake let's have done with business."

"Briefly," he began, "I have discovered that the document which Hall filed is a forgery. I have also reason to believe that the real will, when found, will name your cousin, Miss Sawyer, as sole legatee."

"*That girl!*"

The words came with explosive vehemence, and Thorpe looking up quickly into the woman's face was startled. The lips that had smiled but a moment before had reformed themselves into a narrow straight line; the softness had faded from the gray

eyes and in its place there came the hard steely glint of the woman of the dance-hall.

"Yes," he repeated, "I believe Miss Sawyer to be the sole legatee. She is a good woman, and Hall is a scoundrel. Wouldn't you rather see her get it?"

"No! A thousand times no!"

For a time the young man was silent.

"You women are beyond my comprehension," he said, at last.

"And what is more," she asserted determinedly, "she is not going to get it—if I can help it."

The woman rose to her feet and began to feverishly pace the floor.

"We will not contest the will which Hall has filed. And if the will which you speak of, appears at any future time, we will fight it—yes fight it to the last ditch!"

Thorpe gazed at the woman in amazement. "Why do you object to Miss Sawyer?" he managed to ask.

"Because," she answered fiercely, "because I do."

"A woman's reason," he observed dryly.

"Can I depend upon you to follow my instructions in this matter?" she asked, and stopping her pacing of the floor she placed her hands upon his shoulders and gazed into his eyes searchingly.

The answer was sharp and decisive: "*No!*"

"No? Haven't I retained you as my lawyer in this affair?" she demanded.

"As a lawyer," returned the young man quietly, "I am an officer of the court. To do as you suggest would not only be dishonorable, but it would be criminal—it would be conniving with fraud."

"Fraud fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed, snapping her fingers contemptuously. "The estate rightfully belongs to me doesn't it? Well then I should have the right to dispose of it as I see fit. See here, this matter seems to be one of personal prejudice! You don't like Hall, and I—yes, I don't like that girl. She's so good is she!" and the woman's nose wrinkled with a savage contempt, "so sweet! so pure! so——"

"Stop!" cried Thorpe, rising from his chair. "You must not talk of her!"

"Oh, I mus'n't, mus'n't I! I suppose I'm too vile to utter Helen Sawyer's name! That's what offends you, is it? Or is it," and she sneeringly dropped into western vernacular, "that you are going to make a play for the big money?"

Thorpe took his hat. "I am going," he said, "and I refuse to continue as your attorney.

"Go," she sneered. "I'll get Forbes. He has no such school-girl notions. He's a crook all right; but he's too honest to double-cross a client like you have done!"

Thorpe flushed. "I bid you good afternoon," he said, and bowed himself out the door.

"Go! go! I hope I never see you again!" she cried passionately.

Thorpe closed the door behind him and passed through the gate on to the street.

"*John!*"

He looked back and saw the woman standing in the doorway, her arms stretched out towards him supplicatingly.

"John," she wailed, "I didn't mean it! Come back!"

The young man shook his head determinedly and continued up the street.

"John," she cried, "I must see you, if only for a moment—*I must!*"

But Thorpe had turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

The woman shut the door, walked unsteadily into her room and flung herself upon the bed. Then she wept bitterly.

"Why did I? why did I?" she sobbed. "He's gone, he's gone."

For hours Cora Sands lay upon the bed. Alternately she wept bitter tears of remorse, and then she tried to convince herself that she did not care. But in this endeavor she was unsuccessful, for the image of John Thorpe's strong, clean-cut face

would arise before her and she would relapse again into a flood of tears.

However, as the shades of evening approached she arose somewhat chastened in spirit, and, after washing away the tear-stains, looked at herself in the glass.

"You fool!" she exclaimed angrily. "There is as good in the sea as has ever been caught." It was the oldest logic in the world—and the most unsatisfactory. "Let him go," she went on. "Let him go to his fate."

She walked into the other room and picked up the letter which Thorpe had laid upon the table, and, as if to assure herself, read it again. It was postmarked "Cheyenne," and it was written upon the stationery of the Inter-Ocean Hotel:

cora Sands—. i thot i wood rite you a few lines today and let you no how we are coming along. we are going to be well organised nerly 200 of us. we start day after tomorow and the first plase i am going to lead them is to the JT whear i am going to fix the new york kid so he wont be able to danse any more dam walses.

yours trulley Tom.

"He must have been drunk to have written this," she muttered contemptuously. "Drunk and boastful—the fool! So they start in three days—then

day after to-morrow will see the finish of Mr. John Thorpe. I'm glad of it!"

Glancing carelessly at the envelope she noticed that it had been mailed on April the second.

"To-day is the seventh," she mused. "I should have gotten it upon the fourth—it must have been delayed.

Suddenly a great fear seized her.

"They started on the fifth—this is the seventh—they have had time to get here! I can't let him go! I must save him!"

She sank trembling into a chair. "Even now he may be riding into them," she cried aloud. "I must save him! I must!"

It was but the work of a moment to dispatch the cook to the Tin Front stable for her horse. Then she hurriedly changed her dress, putting on thick woolen garments, for she knew that the night would be cold. A long, heavy cloak, a sombrero, and a bandana knotted loosely around her throat completed her costume and made an effectual disguise. Ten minutes later she was in the saddle and was riding down the Casper road with quirt and spur.

Down the side street she rode, not turning into the main road until she had passed the last house of the town, then as she turned south on the stage road she urged her horse into a run. Gamely the lean, wiry bronco responded, and his hoofs pounded steadily over the dry, dusty road, mile after mile.

Sleeping cattle scrambled hastily to their feet and scampered from the path of the apparition that thundered upon them from out of the night; some freighters, seated about their camp-fire, arose astonished to see the muffled figure crouched low over the saddle, dash madly by, unheeding their salutations; a party of cowpunchers on their way to town reined their horses aside barely in time to escape collision, and they cursed the breach of road etiquette, shouting fiercely after the reckless rider and one even chanced a pistol shot in the dark. But the woman heeded them not, for with the rhythm of the horse's hoofs came the refrain, "Too late, too late, too late," and she lashed the heaving flanks of the game little horse with the energy of despair. The bronco now began to falter and to stumble blindly, and she was forced to rein him in to a walk; but he had little respite, for as soon as her experienced touch told her that the animal had in a measure regained his wind, he was pushed into a long lope.

At last she drew near the ranch-house and her heart sickened as she saw that the cabin was dark. Not a ray of light emanated from the windows which had hitherto beamed forth their hospitality to the passing traveler. Trembling with excitement and anxiety she sprang from the staggering horse, and throwing the reins to the ground, she rushed wildly up the steps and recklessly flinging open

the door stepped into the lighted room where she looked into the barrels of a pair of six-shooters in the hands of Nate Champion and Nick Ray.

"Well I'll be dogged if it ain't the Sage-hen!" ejaculated the astonished Champion, lowering his weapon. "Thought you was in town 'tendin' to business."

"Where's John?" she demanded tremulously.

"He ain't got back from town yet. Why?"

"I must see him at once. I must see him at once—it is a matter of life and death."

"Set down and wait for him," put in Ray. "He'll be back before mornin'."

"He must not stay here to-night!" she cried.

"Why not?" demanded Champion.

"Because—because it's not safe."

Champion laughed cynically. "So we've found out," he said pointing to the bullet-hole over the bunk. "But the Kid is goin' to stick here jest the same—he ain't the quittin' kind."

"No! no!" protested the woman. "He must not stay here—they will kill him."

"Who will?—and why? Who is after him?"

For a moment the woman did not answer; her bosom heaved with emotion and her face twitched with suppressed excitement. The two men watched her narrowly.

"I must tell you!" she suddenly exclaimed. "It's a big conspiracy. You must leave here at

once. They are coming here . . . *to-night*—even now it may be too late."

"But who are 'they'?" persisted Champion.

"Don't ask me any questions—there isn't time. I tell you there is a big conspiracy against you and your only hope is to flee at once. Come!"

"And leave the house to be burnt down? Well, I reckon not."

"But I tell you the house will be attacked—and before morning."

"Well then," said Nate determinedly, "I sure won't leave, and I looks forward to said attack with the impatience of a bridegroom. See them boxes over there? Well there's over a thousand shells in them boxes, and we got three Winchesters to shoot 'em with. The walls of this shack are over a foot thick. We're prepared. If there's goin' to be any attack, Mr. Ray and myself will be the committee on reception, and we sure will give them a warm time. No, sir, we stay here!"

"But I tell you it's folly. You'll be outnumbered."

"If we ain't I'll be disappointed," retorted Nate grimly.

"There will be nearly two hundred of them—perhaps more."

Both men laughed outright. "The Sioux are not off the reservation, be they?" inquired Champion facetiously. "Some one has been foolin' you,

little gal. The big fellers might be able to sick a few of their punchers on us, but such a thing as a hundred is plumb out of the question."

"What I have told you is true," she insisted. "I *know it.*"

Nate shook his head incredulously. "It's a false alarm," he said grinning. "Some one has played a joke on you."

The woman turned upon him angrily. "Do you think I'm a fool?" she demanded. Do you think I would have ridden these fifteen miles at break-neck speed to tell you something that I do not know is true? Now I have warned you—I have even pleaded with you to go, but you won't. I'm going."

Drawing her heavy cloak closely about her she suited her actions to her words, and as she passed out into the night she angrily slammed the door behind her.

Left to themselves the two men sat and listened to the rapidly diminishing hoof-beats of the woman's horse.

"Whew," whistled Champion, "but that woman's got a temper!"

"Do you reckon there is anything in what she said?" queried Ray reflectively.

"Naw. You can see that she's gone on the Kid, and she jes' makes up that play for effect. You notice she didn't stay here, and that's 'cause she calculates on meeting Johnny on his way back from

town where she can make her play all alone—she knowed we'd laugh. She's too smart for that——"

Champion stopped suddenly and listened, for a distant shot broke the stillness of the night. It rolled and echoed among the hills and then again all was silence.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Ray.

Champion slipped the bar into the cleats on either side of the door, and then picking up his Winchester he examined the magazine.

"Likely some cowpuncher full of Last Chance whisky, exercising his six-shooter," he remarked.

"But, Nate," said Ray, in a lowered voice, "that wasn't no six-shooter—*it was a rifle.*"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ADVANCE.

It was after midnight when the special with Captain Stanley's legion pulled into the station at Cheyenne. To a casual observer the three coaches might have appeared to be empty, for not a ray of light shone from the windows, and from within there came not a sound.

Upon the depot platform, silently awaiting, stood Lem Fulton and a score of hard-faced Idaho punchers whose forbidding countenances under the harsh shadows of the sputtering arc lights bespoke some grim and deadly mission.

As the train drew abreast the waiting men, the door of the last coach was cautiously opened, a beckoning arm was thrust out, the Idaho men scrambled aboard, and then, almost without stopping, the special rolled out of the Cheyenne yards and soon was speeding northward across the sagebrush wastes of southeastern Wyoming.

At Casper the next morning, the station agent was astounded to see a passenger train approaching from the southward. Such a thing was unheard of, for there was but one train a day into Casper, the terminus of the road, and it invariably

came in the evening and departed the next morning. This phenomenon was but the climax of a number of mysterious events that had perplexed the agent that morning. In the first place he had just returned from a fruitless search of the town for one John Smith, the consignee of certain heavy boxes that had been put off the train the night before and which were now reposing in the baggage-room. And strange as it may seem, no John Smith could be found in all Casper; even the punchers who had arrived the night before with the big drove of horses that now filled the corrals, could render him no comfort or assistance. But most mysterious of all was the telegram that the callow-faced stranger had asked for, and which came but a little while afterwards—a telegram that made him gasp.

If the bewildered agent had wished for additional mystery and adventure he was soon to be gratified. The train drew alongside the platform, a score of men piled out, there were a half dozen revolver shots, and the solitary insulator which supported the telegraph wire disappeared into thin air, and the wire sagged to the ground.

"Cut the line," was Kennedy's terse command, and a moment later Casper was severed from the outside world.

"I followed instructions," whispered Jud Higgins, who now joined the party, "and Horn and

I cut the Buffalo wire in four places yesterday afternoon."

Kennedy nodded approvingly.

Hall was there, too, and when questioned by Kennedy only smiled loftily and referred vaguely to his "eastern methods."

Over by the corral experienced cooks were preparing a breakfast of coffee and bacon, and while this was in progress the men climbed up and sat upon the corral fence critically inspecting the hundred and fifty horses which were to be their mounts.

After breakfast the work of outfitting began. In spite of the protests of the station agent, John Smith's boxes were smashed open and found to contain the very things the men were looking for. In some were saddles and accouterments of various kinds; in others there were Winchester rifles, all of the same model and caliber, 45–90; from other boxes came blankets, six-shooters, cartridges, and munitions of war of all kinds. The arrangements were perfect. Nothing seemed to have been forgotten, and over Captain Stanley's leathern visage there stole a grim smile of satisfaction.

The arms were distributed, the two commissary wagons loaded, the horses roped and saddles adjusted, and then Kennedy made a speech—perhaps the longest one in his career. A few curious onlookers had gathered about, but they were gruffly told to "clear out," which they did with alacrity.

"Men," said Kennedy, "we have outfitted you, right, as we promised you we would. Whatever happens, the outfits belong to you. We count up a hundred and twelve men all told, and I'm boss, with Captain Stanley second in command. We are goin' straight to the Hole-in-the-Wall country, which is about a hundred and forty mile north of here, and we got to git there some time to-morrow night. This ain't goin' to be no Sunday-school picnic, and any feller what thinks it is, might as well quit right here. You are goin' to run into the hardest bunch of rustlers and killers in the whole country, and there ain't goin' to be no prisoners took on either side. As you been told before, you git five a day, and fifty each for scalps —and you will find plenty to get too."

This last statement brought forth a yell of approval from the men, and then following Kennedy's example they swung into their saddles and the nearly six score of adventurers, who, had they lived a few centuries earlier, might have been found with Cortez, or Drake, or Morgan, cantered their horses briskly out of town and set out on their hazardous enterprise with the greatest of cheerfulness. The invasion had begun.

The start was auspicious: no prettier day ever favored as unholy a cause. The early spring grass had just begun to green the brown hills, birds twittered in the cottonwoods, and colonies of prairie-

dogs chirped the invaders a cheerful welcome. By twos the men rode, separated by long intervals—the better to escape the dust. At the head of the column rode Kennedy and Stanley, while at their flank, as a sort of an aide, rode Tom Horn. The Captain's Texans were at his heels, followed by Lem Fulton and the Idaho contingent, while last of all trailed the commissary wagons in charge of Jud Higgins. The cavalcade wound its way first up the middle fork of Casper creek, and then over the divide and down the valley of the south fork of Powder river. A picturesque valley is that of the Powder river, but for its beauties the invaders had scant regard—it was the morrow that engaged their thoughts. And yet it was only the older men who were the serious ones; it was they who rode along as decorous as so many honest artisans going to a day's labor. The younger men, confident, boisterous, and profane, chaffed each other and laughingly made wagers in good-natured rivalry as to who would first "get his man"; and each of them privately resolved to do such deeds of valor and to reckon his dead so numerous that his record should eclipse that of the mighty Billy the Kid, himself.

All that day the column pressed forward. A short halt was made at noon, and another at supper time, and after moon-rise the men were again at the saddle and twenty more miles were covered

before they drew rein on their tired horses for the night.

Some strange elation seem to possess Hall. All day long as he clutched the bows of the lurching commissary wagon, for he was its only passenger, an occasional smirk would flit across his clammy features, and once, when he pulled from his pocket a yellow envelope and fondled it for a moment, the driver was almost sure that he chuckled. That night after supper, he summoned Kennedy, Stanley and Fulton, hinting that he had a secret to divulge.

In the light of the smoky lantern Hall sat on the wagon tongue while the other men squatted on their haunches, cowboy-fashion, waiting developments.

"Some of you men have laughed at my eastern methods," began Hall, "but I am going to show you that they are not to be despised. I have here in my pocket a trump card which you will acknowledge when you see it, it insures the success of our undertaking."

"I'd rather have fifty more men than all the trumps in the deck," growled Stanley.

"Wait," and Hall with a triumphant grin drew from his inside pocket a yellow envelope, extracted a telegram, and handed it to Lem Fulton who was nearest the light. "Read," he said.

It took the Snake river cattleman but a moment to read the short message, and an exclamation of

wonder and delighted surprise broke from his lips.

"You're a daisy!" he ejaculated. "How did you get it?"

Hall smiled superciliously. "Some of my eastern methods," he replied.

"Why, men," cried Fulton, "we jest can't lose. With these killers, and this here order, we got a hand what can't be beat."

"That's what it amounts to," remarked Hall, folding the message and replacing it in the envelope. "There are four troops of cavalry and three companies of infantry at Fort McKinne."

"But how in the devil did you manage to get such an order?" inquired Fulton, grinning.

"Washington influence. It was quite properly explained to the War Department that a condition of riot and disorder exists in Johnson county which is beyond the control of the state authorities. It was also explained that the wires north of Casper were down, which they are, thanks to Higgins and Horn," he added, "and that I am the proper person to deliver the message by courier. Without a direct order from the War Department, federal troops have no authority to act, no matter how grave a situation may be."

"Well, now, Kennedy, who would have thought of that!" and Fulton smote his knee in a rapture of enthusiasm.

Kennedy made no reply.

"As fer me," drawled Stanley, "that there order don't go. I ain't never played with no marked kyards or with no hold-out yit, and I ain't goin' to. If them rustlers up there whip us, I'm goin' to take my medicine without hollerin'. That's all I got to say."

Hall's countenance fell. He had expected applause, but had received only a rebuke. For Lem Fulton's praise he did not care; he longed for the approval of the leaders. All day he had hugged to his bosom his precious telegram, and all day he had speculated upon the commendations of Kennedy and Stanley.

"But, Cap," expostulated Fulton, "you know that the sheriff and everybody in the whole county is playin' in with the rustlers, and if we *should* happen to git penned—why we'd jest git chawed up, that's all. The regulars are the only ones what could git us out. Of course we ain't never goin' to have to deliver that there message, but then a'gin it ain't a bad thing to have."

"You heared me, didn't you?" retorted Stanley savagely. "I never was no sure-thing man, and I ain't goin' to begin now!"

"Well, Cap," put in Kennedy, apologetically, "Hall can tear it up—we don't have to use it, you know."

"Yes," agreed the old warrior, somewhat mollified, "he can tear it up."

But Hall had no such chivalric ideas, and had the Captain watched him that night, he might have seen him insert a closely rolled yellow envelope into the lining of his coat.

The mercenaries were on the move the next morning before dawn, for seventy long miles were to be covered before the coming of another day. The morrow would see them in the hostile country, and there it was planned to divide the command into a half dozen swift-moving forces who would strike out in as many different directions, each party be guided by and to "work" under the direction of one of the members of the committee, after which the entire army was to rendezvous in the town of Buffalo.

The horses were pushed to the limit of their endurance, and the lumbering commissary wagons were left far to the rear. And the men were riding, too, for they knew that their sharp-eyed leaders would countenance no lounging in the saddle. Yet, threaten, as Stanley did, against "nigger-brand," the new saddles galled the horses' backs and made them flinch under the weight of their riders, but steadily through the clouds of alkali dust the game descendants of the charges of Cortez put the miles behind them. All the long afternoon the invaders urged their tired horses forward; sweat streamed from under saddle-skirts, deep breathing and dilated nostrils told of distress, yet cruel rowels sank only

deeper into quaking flanks and oaths became the louder. No stop was made for the evening meal, and after the sun had set behind the Big Horns they rode in the chill shadow of the valley, and men and horses seemed grateful for the change and pressed anxiously on as though to make the most of this favorable hour of twilight.

Hour after hour through the gloom they rode, horses stumbled and men reeled in the saddles, yet from the leaders their came no sign of a slackening of pace. A few minutes before midnight, however, Kennedy silently turned the column off the road, and the men, reining their weary mounts aside, cautiously began the ascent of a hill, following the lead of Tom Horn, who now acted as guide. Save for the occasional stumbling of a horse over a stone and the muttered oath of its rider, there was not a sound, for by Kennedy's order all conversation had ceased. The moon had risen and it could be seen that the men, who hours before had swayed wearily in their saddles, now rode tense and alert and as though nerved for some sudden action; at last they were in the enemy's country. Across the valley, to the eastward, the hills loomed dead-black in their shadows; upon the other side, every detail of the landscape, every bunch of gray sagebrush, stood out in the pale moonlight with vivid distinctness.

At the crest of the hill Tom Horn suddenly wheeled about and held his arms aloft, where,

silhouetted against the moon, he looked like some gigantic vulture with outstretched wings. Instantly reins were drawn, tired horses came to a halt, and "we're there" was whispered down the line. Cautiously the men walked their horses to the summit of the hill and gazed over the crest. Away down in the valley, so far that it looked more like a toy house, they saw the JT cabin. Close by, a long line of cottonwoods and underbrush marked the course of Powder river as it babbled by the ranch-house door, and they could see the stable and corrals standing out clear and distinct in the moonlight. Spread out before them, it was like a picture. Not a moving thing, not a sound disturbed the tranquillity of the valley, and yet from the hill-top nearly six score human wolves gazed fiercely down upon the scene and gloated, for they realized that the valley and all that there was in it was theirs.

"There, men," said Kennedy in a hoarse whisper, "there's the worst nest of rustlers in Wyoming. There's three of 'em, one the brains of the outfit, the other two dead shots—so look out."

There was a whispered consultation among Kennedy and his lieutenants and then Stanley turned to his Texans:

"Men," he said, "they tell me these here two buckaroos are plenty bad *hombres,* so we'll git 'em in the ole-fashioned way—surroun' the house and

pot 'em in the mornin' when they come out. Now a half dozen of you git down there and git positions; the rest of you turn in and git some sleep, 'cause to-morrer is goin' to be a big day."

Leaving the main body to make camp on the stream a half mile below the house, six men trailed down the hill, as silently as ghosts.

"Be careful, they got dogs," whispered Horn warningly.

Across the hay-flat they went, and then with the cunning of marauding Sioux they crouched and slunk along an *arroya* towards the devoted ranch-house. Occasionally a man would throw himself in some fancied place of vantage, the others passing over or around him, seeking better positions. It was almost a certainty that the inmates of the cabin would come out of the back door in going to the stable or down to the stream for water, and for that reason the men took positions in the rear. The stable harbored a rifleman, two more were in the corral, another was secreted in an old wagon-bed, while Shotgun Rawlins, scorning a rifle and hugging "Old Betsy" to his bosom, crouched behind the wood-pile near the back door.

But Tom Horn had another idea. A lane ran from the house to the main road, a distance of perhaps three hundred yards, and at this point he determined to take his position, for it had occurred to him that there was a possibility that some of the

occupants of the ranch-house had not yet returned from town. Reaching the intersection of the lane and the road he found a large boulder which offered concealment, and behind which he secreted himself and carefully examined his weapons. The inspection was satisfactory and at its conclusion the thin lips curled into the semblance of a smile as Horn thought how he had stolen a march on the others; then he sat himself down in the shade of the rock and waited. Hatred and revenge burdened his thought, for he had a grievance against all three of his intended victims; and avarice played a part too, for he intended to claim his reward, not of a paltry fifty dollars, but the old price, fifteen hundred.

"I hope all three of 'em come along," he said to himself. "One of 'em, fifteen hundred; two of 'em three thousand; three of 'em forty-five hundred. Forty-five hundred is a powerful lot of money. I wonder what the Sage-hen would think of me with forty-five hundred."

For a long time he mused thus, and then he awoke to a sudden realization that it was getting late. "If they are comin' at all, they orter be 'long now," he growled, as he consulted his watch. The delay brought upon him a strange uneasiness. Nervously cocking and uncocking his Winchester, he stood up and peered down the road, but he could see nothing. A dozen times he examined his

weapon to see if he had neglected to throw a cartridge from the magazine into the firing chamber, and again and again he spun the cylinders of his six-shooters. A hundred times, in the greenish, uncanny moonlight, he fancied he saw men approaching from the direction of town. A steer, walking placidly down the road, caused him to crouch hastily with pounding heart behind the boulder; and a timber wolf, howling in the hills, caused him to shudder. A feeling of timidity stole over him and he cursed himself, for to him it was an experience new and strange.

"I'll git 'em, I'll git 'em," he kept repeating to himself; and then as if to strengthen his flagging courage with the bitterness of his hate, he conjured before him his encounter with Thorpe in the dance-hall, his humiliation by Champion in the Capitol saloon, and lastly the kick of Nick Ray. As Horn recalled these things his face contorted with passion, and into the dead-white eyes came the look that caused men to sicken and turn aside.

Suddenly there came an unexpected blaze of light from the ranch-house. For an instant Horn saw a figure framed in the doorway and standing out in sharp contrast to the brightly illuminated interior of the cabin. With the shutting of the cabin door the vision vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and Horn, rigid with deadly purpose, stared into the dark shadows surrounding the house

with straining eyes. Holding his breath, he listened intently. To his ears, faintly at first, there came the unmistakable sound of hoof-beats, and then from out of the gloom of the cottonwoods and on to the moonlit lane a mounted figure appeared.

For the hundredth time Horn cocked his rifle—this time it was no false alarm. The sweat broke out upon his brow, his lips were dry and feverish, and he constantly moistened them with his tongue; his heart throbbed as though from some great physical exertion, and his whole body trembled with excitement.

"What in hell is the matter with me?" he muttered savagely. "I never felt like this before."

As the horse and rider approached, Horn, with an effort, pulled himself together. The long wait, the awful silence, the specters in the moonlight, had all unnerved him; but now that the time for action had arrived, the old calculating coolness returned to him. His keen eyes could discern the figure plainly now, and he saw that this time it was no specter, but that it was flesh and blood. On came the horse; it was about fifty yards away—nothing could save the rider now. Thirty yards,—twenty yards,—ten yards and then the waiting man stepped quickly from his place of concealment into the road. The horse with a sudden snort of terror swerved. Instantly the Winchester leaped to Horn's shoulder, a long stream of red fire darted from its

muzzle, and the heavy report rolled across the valley. There was a reeling in the saddle and the figure, with a choking cry, fell forward under the horse's hoofs.

Horn mechanically pumped another cartridge into his rifle and then stepped cautiously forward. The body was laying on its back, its face ghastly white in the moonlight. Horn dazedly noticed a woman's skirt, and then from beneath the sombrero he saw the great mass of tawny yellow hair that had fallen down over the shoulders.

"My God, I've killed a woman!" he gasped.

He looked closer—it was Cora Sands.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE KILLING.

THERE was a droop to Thorpe's shoulders as he rode, for he had spent a sleepless night. Over and over again he had reviewed the scene of the day before at the cottage with the green blinds, and each time he had felt the sting of the woman's scorn. But he had never wavered in his determination to expose the villainy that he had uncovered, for Thorpe, fortunately, was one of those lawyers who could still remember his solemn oath upon being admitted to the bar; his moral sensibilities had remained unblunted by his years of contact with a sordid world, and to him his duty was plain and clearly defined. Before morning he had formulated his plan, and now he had started out upon its execution. He would bring Champion before the county attorney and his testimony, supported by the telegram from the Northern Paper Company, should be sufficient ground for the issuing of warrants for Hall and Forbes upon the charge of forgery. Then, he had no doubt, Forbes, in order to save his own precious freedom, could be easily prevailed upon to turn State's evidence, and the existence and wording of the missing will

would be established. And incidentally there came before the young man's eyes a picture of Hall being led off to prison, at which, it must be admitted, he smiled grimly.

These thoughts occupied Thorpe's mind as he jogged along the dusty road, but as he drew near the WS ranch, he, as though with a sudden awakening, pulled his horse into a walk and gazed wistfully at the curtainless windows of the ranch-house. The WS home-ranch was usually a busy place, but on this particular morning it seemed tenantless and without life, for, as he found out afterwards, most of the men had been ordered to a horse round-up in a distant part of the range. Hundreds of WS cattle were visible in the valley, and the hills concealed thousands more. Stopping his horse upon a knoll of the road, Thorpe surveyed the WS possessions, and as he did so a look of pride stole over his clean-cut features, for he realized that this vast estate which was now overshadowed by Hall's greedy hand, was to be saved and restored to its rightful owner by his own intervention. For a moment only the young man indulged himself that exaltation which a man of power feels when about to do some great or good thing, and then with a happy laugh he gave his horse a sharp cut with his quirt and cantered briskly on towards his own domain.

Five long, dusty miles separated the two ranch-

houses, but now Thorpe's weariness seemed to have vanished, and as he rode blithely favored a raucous-voiced raven with a selection from the latest metropolitan opera success. Suddenly a distant shot broke the stillness of the morning, and then another, and another. Thorpe was not alarmed, for cattlemen carry rifles for wolf-killing; indeed he knew of a number of men who made a business of the extermination of these pests, for the bounties were high. He quickened his pace, for now two more shots, coming from over the hill and in the direction of his own ranch-house, excited his curiosity, and he was conscious, too, for an instant, of a vague sense of anxiety. And then he laughed at his fears. "Indians!" he cried aloud, with a mock dramatic gesture. "Accursed redskins, the Pale-faced Avenger of the Plains is on your trail!

He had reached the hill, and still grinning in appreciation of his own humor, had begun the ascent when there came to his ears a few scattering shots and then a long rolling volley. Instantly he, with a violent pull on the reins, stopped his horse. For some moments he remained mitionless; a nausea of apprehension overcame him. The volley could mean but one thing—it was a fight at the ranch-house. Quickly dismounting he led his horse up the slope, and then as he peered over the crest and down into the valley below, an exclamation of horror burst from his lips.

The ranch-house was surrounded, and from every bit of cover there came puffs of white smoke accompanied by the incessant booming of heavy rifles. An occasional shot came from the cabin, but with what effect it was impossible to see. "It's the big fellows!——they're cleaning out the valley! O God, if I only had a rifle!"

With blanched face, and with lips that jibbered, he watched the unequal conflict beneath him. He could see some men at work on a wagon behind the stable. He saw that they had torn down one end of the stable and were securing the logs to the end of the wagon, making a barricade. Now they were heaping the wagon-bed with hay. Slowly the truth dawned upon him and he understood their purpose —they intended to burn the house.

Four men now seized the wagon-tongue, and shielded by the barricade and protected by a heavy fire from the stables, backed it up against the house. A moment later the men were running away and Thorpe could see a red tongue of fire leap quickly through the loosely piled hay and he groaned aloud as he heard the triumphant cheers of the besiegers. Now the dense white smoke, rolling lazily in the quiet atmosphere, hung like a shroud over the doomed cabin and obscured it from view; the gun-fire had ceased and there was an ominous silence. Would the occupants stay and be burned alive, or would they elect to die in the open? With in-

coherent curses Thorpe waited, and he noticed not the blood dripping from his knuckles, where in his rage the nails of his clinched fists had entered the flesh. The finish was now a matter of but a few moments—he could but await the end.

The suspense was not long. A slight movement in the still air slowly rolled the smoke back, revealing the house, and Thorpe saw that the eaves were afire. Suddenly the back door was thrown open and a man staggered out firing his Winchester from his hip, and Thorpe recognized the sturdy figure of Nate Champion. For a moment the smoke enveloped the scene, and when it again rolled aside Champion was seen to grope blindly, stumble and fall, and his rifle to roll from his grasp. He was on his feet again in an instant, running and discharging his six-shooter in front of him at random. It was evident, however, that he was blinded by the smoke, for he ran against the corral fence and fell headlong. Before he could regain his feet, a small, lithe figure stepped from behind the stable, and, taking deliberate aim at the prostrate man, fired. Feebly Champion rose to a sitting position, but his assailant quickly pumped another cartridge into his rifle coolly walked to within a few yards of the unfortunate man, fired again, and Thorpe saw the brave man fall to rise no more.

Thorpe sank to his knees, covering his face with his hands as though to shut out the horrible sight.

"Poor Nate," he moaned, "it is all over. What can I do? What can I do?"

For a time he remained crouched upon the ground, overcome by the terrible scene which he had just witnessed, and then yells and shots from the direction of the house aroused him. Looking down the road he saw, not far from the ranch-house, a team of running horses drawing a wagon containing two men, while behind them the late victors of the one-sided battle were in pursuit. The fugitives had a good start, but it was evident that the yelling horsemen would overtake them. On they came, the wagon bumping high into the air as it hit the rough places in the road, and all but overturning at every jump of the madly galloping horses. One man was driving while the other applied the lash; neither appeared to be armed. Thorpe gazed at this new tragedy as though spellbound; the swift succession of horrors dazed him, and yet he realized full well that before him was a race for life.

As the wagon neared the crest of the hill, Thorpe mounted his horse and galloped down to meet it, why, he did not know. The panting horses now slowed up as they neared the summit, and the men, springing to the ground, began to cut the harness. So occupied were they at this that they did not see Thorpe until he was upon them, and then with sharp exclamations of terror, they dodged behind their foam-covered horses.

Almost instantly there was a mutual recognition, and Thorpe saw that the terrorized men were his neighbors, Jack Flagg and his son, Tom.

"Clean out of here, Johnny, fer God's sake!" cried Flagg. "They are tryin' to kill us all!"

Frantically tearing the harness from the backs of their plunging horses, they mounted, and as they galloped past him, Thorpe saw from their drawn, sweat-covered faces that the fear of death was upon them. A cloud of dust showed that the pursuers had not slackened their pace, and Thorpe, wheeling and putting spurs to his horse, joined the fleeing pair.

"We're out of range now," panted Flagg, "but they will git us before long, if something don't happen."

"Who are they?" asked Thorpe, spurring his tired horse in a vain effort to keep up.

"Don't know," shouted Flagg over his shoulder. "I never see 'em before."

Ride as he would Thorpe soon saw that his wearied horse could not maintain the pace and that he was fast being left behind.

The elder Flagg, looking backward, saw the pursuers as they appeared over the top of the hill; they had stopped yelling and were riding hard. Now there was a fusillade of shots and he saw little puffs of dust spring up about Thorpe, who now trailed a hundred yards or more in the rear.

"Good-bye, Johnny," he shouted. "Good-bye, my boy."

As the full significance of Flagg's farewell came to him, Thorpe experienced that sickening sense of hopelessness which at times overcomes the bravest of men. "So this is the end," he thought: "and out here—in such a place—to die like a hunted beast. God!" he ejaculated. Desperately he plied his quirt. Every moment he expected to feel the lead which whistled about him. He looked despairingly around for some place of concealment, but the bare hills offered none, and now a stretch of wire fence on either side of the road held him piteously a prisoner between its confines. Before him was the long straight piece of road near the WS ranch-house and there he expected his end, for the deep breathing and waivering gait of his horse told him too truly of the animal's exhaustion. Exultant yells behind him signalized the end of the chase. With a forlorn hope of escaping the bullets of his pursuers, he rode low in the saddle, and yet in as many seconds his clothes were twice penetrated, pierced by pistol balls. Now his horse was reeling under him, and with a sudden and desperate courage he decided to wheel about and die with his face to the enemy. With all his strength he pulled on the cruel curb. The cayuse faltered, stumbled, fell, and Thorpe knew no more.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ALARM.

THE fact that Uncle Billy had returned to town was in itself inconsequential, as it was a certainty that the old man would not remain away long. But the fact that he had returned "right," that he had accomplished the purpose of his journey, that he had attained his greatest ambition, made all Buffalo gasp in astonished admiration, for Uncle Billy had returned with the bank-roll of the big game in Denver. He had at last made them turn over the box, and from now on he was to stand in the public eye as a man of the greatest affluence and prominence. That this marvelous thing was no mere rumor was attested by two score men, for had they not seen with their own eyes when the old man had opened his dilapidated valise and passed over the bar to the safe-keeping of Mr. Fidler, bale after bale of dingy green and yellow-back currency? Furthermore, there gleamed from the traveler's shirt-bosom a diamond of unheard-of size, while upon his fingers were two more of scarcely less magnitude.

"No, its jest part of the cleanup," he remarked,

in answer to the questioning gaze of those who surrounded him. "Besides these here diamon's, I own two sets of saloon fixtures, two gamblin'-house layouts, four teams and three hacks, and a few other chips and whetstones of which I disremember. Yes, gentlemen, I done purty well," and so saying the old man chuckled softly to himself, laid an eagle on the bar, and invited the crowd to "have somethin'."

Like wildfire the news traveled down the street and the idle population of the town moved as a single individual to the Capitol saloon to do the great man honor—and incidentally to partake of his hospitality. And there was no lack of sincerity in the congratulations, for everybody liked the kindly old man, and they gripped his hand and slapped him on the back in hearty good-will.

Of them all, Doc Richards alone seemed stunned. For a long time the fat man sat in the little office of the livery stable, his chair tipped back against the wall and his feet in their accustomed place upon the desk, and tried to plan some demonstration worthy of the occasion; but in the end his deliberate wits proved unequal to the task, and so with a sigh of regret he got up and shuffled his way down to the saloon. Elbowing his way through the noisy crowd he seized Uncle Billy by the arm.

"*Now,* I reckon you'll want somethin' to eat," he began huskily.

But matters gustatory were far from Uncle Billy's thoughts, so dexterously inserting a cigar into his friend's gaping mouth he quietly, but firmly, lead him to a chair by the wall and left him to again ponder and marvel and plan.

Over and over again was Uncle Billy compelled to relate the story of his winnings—how he broke the bank at the first place, and afterwards how he allowed the proprietor to "turn" for his fixtures and layout on his own appraisement, which generosity evoked great applause; how he moved on up the street to the "big game" where the blue sky was the boasted limit; how he played all that night and the next day; how his luck had varied, up and down, and how the tide had finally set in his favor late in the afternoon; how the house had tried to hoodoo his luck by changing dealers, shifting case-keepers and lookouts, and by scores of ways known to those imbued with the superstitions of the game. It was all vastly interesting to his delighted auditors.

"And then," continued the old man, puffing away at his cigar, "the feller asts for leave to turn his lease and saloon fixtures agin three thousand, which proposition I accepts. And it sure was a defeat for Demon Rum, cause I wins and turns over the whole shebang to a big undertaking outfit next door what had outgrowed its quarters. Well, to make a long story short, the feller stays

with me as long as he could last, and when finally he turns for some teams and hacks what he had, he was cleaned right." The old man paused and a smile shone for a moment upon his usually sedate countenance, "He's workin' for me now—drivin' one of them hacks on commission."

The crowd roared with delight. The picture of Big Sam, Denver's most famous gambler, driving a hack for their own Uncle Billy was most delectable indeed.

"Oh, you old son-of-a-gun, you!" ejaculated Mr. Fidler fondly. And then with a grin he commented, "I guess Buffalo can't show them big fellers a few tricks, eh?"

Mr. Fidler's enthusiasm was infectious. Drinks were ordered by admiring citizens with what would have been considered, in any place else but a prosperous cow-town, alarming frequency and a reckless disregard for expense, and the jollification threatened to pass all bounds of moderation.

Festivities were still in progress some hours later when they were suddenly interrupted by loud voices outside, and then two men stumbled exhaustedly into the barroom. In the street a foam-covered horse lay where it had fallen, while near by, with its nose touching the ground, stood another trembling, exhausted bronco whose heaving flanks and wabbling knees told but too truly that it had run its last race.

The new-comers though their faces were begrimmed with sweat and dust were recognized at once. They were Jack Flag and his son. The boy was sobbing convulsively.

"Here! Everybody! Quick!" shouted Flag incoherently. "They are goin' to kill us!"

The boisterous hilarity of the barroom vanished, and the crowd pressed about the excited man with sobered faces. Everybody knew Jack Flag. He was no man for sensation.

"What's the matter?" a dozen men demanded in the same breath.

It was with difficulty that Flag could answer. The exhaustion of the ride, the strain on his nerves, the mystery of the attack, and the horror of the killing, dazed and bewildered him.

With an effort he regained his voice. "They've killed Nate Champion and Nick Ray, and they're a comin' this way," he yelled.

The tall figure of Arapahoe Rowan pushed through the crowd and putting his hand on the hysterical man's shoulder looked at him coolly and reassuringly.

"Who did?" he asked, in his customary low, even voice. "Tell *me*."

"There's a hundred or more—strangers. I come by their chuck-wagons first, and the drivers looked and talked like Texas fellers. They tells me that the outfit is out after rustlers. When I

come by the JT place I see the rest of the outfit a settin' fire to the ranch-house, and then they all took out after me. And the man that set 'em on me rode Hank Kennedy's buckskin—and I believe it was Hank Kennedy hisself.

With the rest of the crowd Uncle Billy had listened in horrified silence, but at the word "Texas" a sudden light of intelligence gleamed in his eyes.

"I meets George Lee and Curley Farris in Denver a few days ago," he put in quickly, "and they tells me there is goin' to be hell a-poppin' among the rustlers soon. They was a waitin' to join a Texas bunch, they tells me, and I believe that this is the same outfit."

"Oh-h!" sobbed young Flag, "they killed Johnny Thorpe. I seen him fall."

"*What!*" Uncle Billy tottered for a moment. "Killed Johnny—my boy?" Tears streamed down the old man's face and his lips twitched tremulously. "Men," he cried vengefully, "I'll give a thousand—five thousand apiece for every one of them Texas Hessians you can kill."

But this promise of reward fell on unheeding ears, if it was heard at all, for there was a tumult of oaths and angry cries.

The born leader was there. It was Arapahoe Rowan who silenced the mob.

"Angus," he said to the sheriff, "sound the fire alarm." Then turning to the noisy crowd, he

ordered: "Men, get ready. We must start in ten minutes."

A moment later and the church bell was clanging ominously. Cow-punchers were galloping madly up and down the street, while others were running to corrals and wagon yards for their mounts. The sidewalk in front of the Capitol saloon was the storm center. Bareheaded merchants, aproned bartenders, and white-faced gamblers, who for the most part constituted the volunteer fire department, mingled with excited cowboys, freighters, and loafers, in the dense swirling mob. The wildest rumors filled the air. It was said that Hank Kennedy at the head of five hundred men was marching on the town to massacre the inhabitants. Robert Foote, the town's patriarchal merchant cried that his store was open to all. "Come on boys," he shouted, "take what you want,—rifles, shells, blankets, grub, anything!"

It does not take long for a western crowd to arm itself, and almost magically the majority of the men appeared with Winchesters and their pockets bulged with ammunition. More men were coming from every direction, and from every quarter came cries of "Kill 'em! hang 'em! lynch 'em!"

Arapahoe Rowan mounting a box, held his hand aloft commanding silence.

"Boys," he shouted, "it's a range war. It's the big fellers a doin' this. And we are a goin' to git

'em—they can't git away. But we got to have more men. Now listen to me: I want three men to ride out of town and stir up the country." His eye swept over the crowd. "And I appint Bill Kepley, Charlie Hoskins, and Billy Bowes to do it. You are all well mounted."

"But I want to—" expostulated Kepley.

"Never mind!" thundered Rowan, "what you want to do. You jest better do what I tell you to do!" and the gaunt leader's brows contracted menacingly.

The crowd turned on the disappointed puncher wrathfully. "Go on, go on," they cried.

The three men drew aside and conferred for a moment, and then they dashed out of town in as many different directions.

"And now," shouted Rowan, "all men what's mounted and ready to go, line up on the other side of the street and Red Angus will swear you in."

With a yell of approval half a hundred horsemen spurred their mounts into a few quick jumps to the opposite side of the street where they whirled about forming a line with the celerity of a crack cavalry troop.

"Now the rest of you men git horses," admonished Rowan, "and if you ain't got any, why borrow 'em—there's a plenty hitched along the street. And all what ain't got rifles go to Foot's and git 'em; and if you can't git a rifle git a shot-

gun; and if you can't git a shotgun git a six-shooter."

The leader's orders were obeyed with alacrity. The unmounted men ran down the street in a wild race for mounts. Horses were confiscated wherever found, stables and corrals were looted, and vehicles left horseless.

"Here!" yelled Angus, "don't take them hosses out of that wagon—it will hold a dozen men."

Following his suggestion all the big ranch wagons were pressed into service.

Less than a half hour later a cavalcade of two hundred determined men filed out of town. Over a hundred were well armed and mounted; two score more were crowded into wagons; and the others, variously equipped, straggled along on foot. Belated punchers from neighboring ranches spurred their sweating horses through the town at a furious gallop, while the remainder of the masculine population looked on and cursed in impotent rage, for horses were priceless and rifles were not to be had.

Grimly rode Arapahoe Rowan at the head of the column, while at his side were his lieutenants, Red Angus, and Bill Knox, the militant preacher. A half dozen picked men, old Indian fighters, rode ahead as scouts. In the wagons the men chaffed

impatiently, their set faces bespeaking a purpose that boded ill for those whom they were seeking.

For an hour the column wound its way around the hills, and then, at last, the scouts were seen galloping back. At a signal from Rowan the men halted and awaited the arrival of approaching horsemen, while he rode forward to receive the news.

The scouts reported that the WS corrals were full of saddled horses, and that a large unmber of men were seen about the premises. To this was added the testimony of one of the scouts, a WS puncher, who stated emphatically that the WS men were out on a horse roundup, and that the men at the ranch-house could be none other than the invading Texans.

"Well boys," said Rowan quietly, "we'll find out purty soon who they are. But the first thing to do it to git between them and Texas. So Red," he ordered, "You take the mounted men and cut off yander around them hills and come up behind them. I'll stay here and round up the late arrivals."

"All right," assented the sheriff, "and as soon as we git placed I reckon we better put them hosses out of business—then we'll have 'em where we want 'em."

Rowan nodded approval. "Don't begin too

soon," he enjoined, "for we're gittin' stronger every minute."

The fence was cut and the sheriff and his men trotted briskly across the hay flat and disappeared around the slope of the hill.

Left to themselves the men squatted in groups along the roadside and talked of fights of other days,—of the Siouxs in Nebraska, and of the Apaches in Arizona, of sheep wars in Colorado, and of private feuds in New Mexico, and in these affairs there were many present who had taken no small part.

Rowan noted with satisfaction that mounted men were arriving in twos and threes, and that weary fighters afoot were straggling in until now his division aggregated nearly a hundred and fifty men.

A half hour passed and some of the men began to betray their impatience by their nervous fingering of their weapons; like hounds they were straining at the leash, and but for Rowan they would have long since have bolted for their quarry. Suddenly a distant fusillade of shots told that Angus's division had been discovered. Instantly Rowan ordered the advance.

The mounted men spurred forward with exultant whoops while those in the wagons and on foot looked on enviously. The wagon teams were lashed into a run, but at the bottom of the hill the men

impatiently jumped out and were soon running up the slope to join the horsemen who had preceded them.

Below and a thousand yards away was the ranch-house and the corrals. Across the valley, on top of the opposite hill, a scattered line of men could be seen. Occasionally there would be a puff of white smoke from the hill top and nearly a quarter of a minute afterwards the dull report of a heavy rifle could be heard. From the shelter of ranch-house and stables other puffs of smoke could be seen and it was evident that the invaders were prepared for a desperate defense.

"Now men," shouted Rowan, "git cover and kill them hosses!"

XXVI.

"IT'S JOHNNY THORPE!"

THE return to Boston seemed inevitable, and Helen Sawyer sighed as she realized how quickly her dreams of fortune had been dispelled. Of late, too, there seemed to be a waning of cordiality in the manner of her cousin, and even that morning he had asked her brusquely how long she intended to stay. True, he had explained to her that the unsettled condition of the country had caused him at times some anxiety for her safety, and yet she could not but contrast this with the oft-repeated axiom that "a woman is safe anywhere in the West." In Kennedy, too, she thought she could detect some abstraction: he, whose greetings had hitherto been so hearty, had become silent and moody; and of the days of horseback riding and trout fishing which he had promised her, he seemed to have forgotten. "I am glad that I am going," she declared to herself. And yet, from the window of her room as she idly watched Dutch Cooper hitch up the buckboard team, she was distinctly conscious that she was sorry. In her short stay in the West she had learned to enjoy it,—to love it. The immen-

sity of its plains, the grandeur of its mountains, the music of its streams, the brilliancy of its wild-flowers contrasted glaringly with the commonplace, humdrum environment of the New England school-teacher. Soon she must begin her struggle afresh —for existence. There was another reason why she sighed so moodily, and even as she compressed her lips determinedly and declared to herself that she didn't care, her heart answered differently, and there arose in her mind's eye the picture of John Thorpe—tall, dark, handsome. She speculated for a time what his life was to be in this land of his adoption; if he would miss her when she was gone, —if he would miss her very much.

"Pshaw, I'm becoming maudlin!" she exclaimed, with a sudden vexation.

She turned to the window again and watched Cooper swing the buckboard team into the "big road", when a furiously riding horseman attracted her attention. A yelling and a scattered dozen shots from further down the road made the girl smile in spite of her mood for the antics of the cowboys had often reminded her of those of over-grown children. First with curiosity she saw Cooper suddenly rein in his team, turn around, and then with surprise she saw him lash the animals cruelly, for Cooper's love of horses was a jest about the ranch. What could it all mean? The man on horseback was riding with whip and spur, and even

to her, unsophisticated as she was in such matters, it was evident that the man was riding queerly. The cowboy rides bolt upright in the saddle, his stirrups long and his legs extended straight down without a curve. This man was riding like a jockey; crouching over the horse's withers, his head almost resting upon the animal's neck, his knees bent into an acute angle by the short stirrups, he was at every stride of the fast tiring bronco, sinking spurs into the quivering flanks, while his arm was mercilessly wielding the quirt.

"The fellow is drunk!" exclaimed the girl disgustedly.

Thoroughly aroused now, she watched the strange spectacle with an intense interest. On came the buckboard at a furious pace and she could see that if Cooper did not succeed in turning off at the ranch road a collision was inevitable. Suddenly she screamed. The horse had fallen and both it and its rider disappeared in a cloud of dust. Now she saw Cooper drop his whip, reach forward across the dash, gather the reins in both hands, and pull back with every ounce of strength that was in him. His team was slowing up, but now as they came alongside the prostrate figure they veered to one side and tried to bolt. With all his strength Cooper tried to hold them, but sidling, rearing, and plunging the frightened creatures suddenly plunged into the wire fence where the tongue

caught for a moment behind a fence post. Transfixed with horror the girl saw Cooper leap from his seat, pick up the lifeless figure and hurl it headlong into the buckboard just as the horses had extricated themselves. The half-wild and thoroughly terrified broncos now started forward on a gallop and she could see Cooper running alongside snatching at the reins which were dragging on the ground. Breathlessly she watched him. Then with a shout of joy she saw him clutch the back of the rear seat and throw himself across it. For a moment he hung there exhausted. Then he unsteadily climbed over the limp figure, then on to the driver's seat, and then by reaching far forward he regained the lines and with an effort turned the maddened brutes off on to the ranch road.

"Bravo! Superb!" cried the girl.

So excited was she that she hardly noticed the appearance of more hard-riding horsemen, and that they, too, had turned off the main road and were now following the buckboard. Even the glint of weapons in their hands caused her no uneasiness, for the cowboy takes a vain and inexplicable delight in the flourishing of six-shooters; she only knew that a seriously injured, perhaps dead, man was being brought to the house and she hastened down stairs to offer what assistance she could.

The buckboard was finally stopped near the ranch-house door. This Cooper accomplished by driving

them nose-on against the building, and they, not being able to go through or over, came to such an abrupt halt that Cooper was precipitated over the dashboard and would have probably come to some serious injury under the feet of the frightened animals had not one of the men opportunely run out of the bunk-house and seized the plunging brutes by the bits.

Hastily scrambling to his feet, Cooper seized the inanimate figure from the buckboard and ran with it into the house.

"Quick! We got to hide him!" he panted. "Where'll I put him?"

"Put him there on the bed, Mr. Cooper," replied the startled girl.

Tenderly Cooper laid the lifeless form on the bed. The clothes were torn and dirt-covered, and the face was so begrimmed and bloody as to be unrecognizable.

The girl shuddered. "Is he dangerously hurt?" she asked.

"I reckon he's done cashed," answered Cooper, "and I'm damned sorry, too, cause it's——"

There was a thunderous clatter of hoofs outside. "*Yip, yip, yipee!* Shoot him! Kill him!" and a half score of reckless riders came dashing around the house as noisily as a pack of hounds in full cry? Then seeing Cooper in the doorway, they pulled their horses up so sharply with their great

curb bits that the agonized creatures reared back on their haunches.

"Are you the feller what driv the buckboard?" demanded the leader.

Cooper nodded.

"Well, we want that man you picked up—he's a rustler."

Helen Sawyer was thoroughly angry. Of cowboys she expected no exaggerated gentleness, but this was plainly no time for coarse humor. That a tragedy was being enacted she little suspected.

"What do you want?" she inquired sharply, stepping out on the porch.

"We want that man," replied the leader sullenly, "and we are a goin' to git him."

Cooper disappeared for a moment into the house and then came out on the porch beside the girl.

"You are too late, pardner," he volunteered indifferently. "The gen'leman's done cashed."

This statement was received with intense satisfaction by some of the men; others began a noisy dispute as to who "got him."

Cooper leaned over and whispered in the girl's ear: "He's alive. These men calculate to kill him. Jump inside and bolt the door—it's, it's Johnny Thorpe."

"John Thorpe!" she faltered. "No, no, don't tell me——"

She could go no further; her face grew suddenly

pale; she could hear a confused murmur of voices about her; her head swam and she felt as though she were about to faint."

"*Quick!*"

The one word from Cooper steadied her; it illumined the murky passages of her mind as a flash of lightning dispells the blackest night and turns darkness into day.

The men were already dismounted and the leader was approaching the door.

Lem Fulton saw the expression of dazed bewilderment fade from the girl's face, and he read her purpose as he saw her features set with sudden resolution. Springing forward he clattered hastily up the steps, his fingers outstretched talon-like, but the girl was too quick for him. With a bound she crossed the threshold, slammed the door, and a sharp, rasping sound told him that she had thrown the bolt.

With a snarl of rage Fulton threw himself against the door, but the stout oaken panels yielded neither to his kicks nor his curses.

"Hold on there, pardner," remonstrated Cooper, easily, "that there room belongs to a lady."

Fulton turned on him fiercely: "You keep out of this, you hear!"

Cooper nodded coolly. And then, although he felt that the hard-faced men about him only wanted

but the slightest signal from their leader to do his destruction, he nonchalantly rolled a cigarette.

"He's dead anyhow," he ventured.

"Then why can't we see him?" vociferated Fulton. "I don't believe it. You are a liar."

Cooper paled slightly under the epithet, and again Fulton thundered at the door. Some of the men brought up a heavy log for a battering-ram and the buckboard driver fidgeted uneasily.

A crowd of men approaching from the road now attracted the attention of the strangers, and in the van Cooper recognized Kennedy's buckskin.

"Here comes the boss," he announced joyfully.

It was indeed the big foreman, and as he drew near it was plain to see that he was in an ugly humor.

"You've made a purty mess of this!" he ejaculated angrily. "Put up them six-shooters, and leave that door alone," he ordered, "you've done harm enough now—bringin' the outfit here. And lettin' them fellers git away, too! Now we've got Johnson county to fight."

"I didn't bring 'em here," expostulated Fulton. "We took out after them three fellers and two of 'em got away, and one of 'em got in here—and we follered him."

"He fell in the road, and I picked him up and brought him in the house," put in Cooper, eagerly.

"Shut up!" roared Kennedy.

"Horn, which one was it that come in here?" he demanded.

"Johnny Thorpe."

"And so you let that jackleg lawyer outride you! What's the matter? Was you afraid of him?"

"Naw," sulkily replied Horn. "He got too big a start on us."

"But he can't git away—he's inside," put in Fulton eagerly.

"Well, I suppose you want to git in there and muss up that room," snapped Kennedy. "Anyhow," he added, "there's a woman in the house. It's got to be did some other way."

Reluctantly Fulton's men stepped down from the porch as though loath to abandon the attack.

"Who's that feller?" inquired one of them, suddenly pointing a finger at a pallid face that appeared at an upstairs window.

It was Hall. Not until Kennedy arrived did he show himself. All day he had cowered in his room, waiting for the tidings that he knew was sure to come. Cooper, with a sudden inspiration, sought him out.

"This is your ranch, Mr. Hall," he said; "order these fellers off. They are after Johnny."

But Hall only looked at him dully and said nothing. Cooper gazed at the man searchingly for a moment, and then as he saw the terror in the

wild protruding eyes, a great wave of disgust came over him.

"God!" he exclaimed, "I thought you was a man."

Singly, and by twos and threes, the invaders rode up and dismounted. Soon the corral was full of horses and the yard swarmed with heavily armed men, and Cooper and a few other WS punchers who happened to be there looked on in open-eyed wonder.

Of all the men, Kennedy, alone, seemed to appreciate the predicament into which the invading force had blundered. He fumed impotently, yet at the same time he gave terse commands right and left in the endeavor to bring order out of confusion. The Chinese cooks were ordered in no uncertain language to prepare food for six score of men; the horses were looked after; and a half-dozen men were sent back to bring up the supply wagons.

"Out two days, and only got two; and let two more git away the first th'ow out of the box!" he ejaculated angrily.

Then he hurriedly summoned a council of war in the bunk-house.

"We got to take Buffalo," he declared, "or they will take us. And we got to do it right away."

In this all concurred.

"I fear we have stirred up a hornet's nest," put in Hall tremulously.

Kennedy gave a snort of disgust. "No, just a little of that 'holy war' that you was so anxious for—that's all."

While Fulton, Horn, and the members of the committee glared malevolently at the fallen oracle, Captain Stanley chuckled softly. "Nothing like 'eastern methods', Mr. Hall," he observed.

"We'll start in twenty minutes," said Kennedy. "We got to be there in a hour and a half; for in two hours, or less maybe, they'll start fer us. We got to beat 'em to it."

With this admonition Kennedy rose to go, when Fulton asked: "What you goin' to do with the feller inside?"

"We won't bother with him," answered Kennedy impatiently.

"Won't bother with him?" repeated Fulton in astonishment. "And after him seeing the boys down Champion and Ray? Why he could hang us all!"

"He's a rustler, ain't he?" put in Stanley significantly.

Kennedy and Hall exchanged glances.

"Certainly," assured Hall.

"Well then," said the Captain, "there's only one thing to do—a rustler is a rustler," and with this obvious remark he lighted a cigarette and strolled indifferently out of the room.

"Well how we goin' to do it?" inquired Kennedy testily.

"Here's a way," suggested Hall after a moment's thought. "I will tell my cousin that the fellow is to be taken to town for medical attention,—and—and he can be lost on the way," he added meaningly.

"Suppose the girl don't swaller the story, and objects?" queried Horn.

"Then," said Hall, "we must take him by force."

Kennedy shrugged his shoulders. "Nasty business," he muttered.

"I'll inveigle her into the back room under some pretext, and lock her in; and then we can do as we please."

"Keno!" approved Fulton. "Your plan is a good one."

The scheme was no sooner proposed than the conspirators set out upon its execution.

Little suspecting his purpose, the girl admitted her cousin into the room where Thorpe, still unconscious, lay upon the bed. The bruised face had been sponged, the sleeve cut away, and the broken arm bandaged as neatly as though by an experienced surgeon.

"Part of my useless education," she said smilingly, and she pointed a little proudly to her work; "I never thought, though, I would have an occa-

"BUT HE WILL STAY HERE, I TELL YOU"

The Invaders

sion to use it." Her face became serious. "Have the men gone?" she asked.

"Yes. It was all a mistake—a sheriff's posse after another man."

The girl tenderly brushed back the hair from the unconscious man's forehead, "I am glad," she said.

"And now," continued Hall, "I have ordered the buckboard to take Thorpe into town where he can have proper medical attention."

The girl glanced up quickly. "Impossible! Have the doctor come here instead. This man cannot be moved for several days."

Hall frowned. He saw that argument was worse than useless and he was at a loss how to proceed. For a moment he glowered at his cousin, and then the hysteria of fear and rage which had oppressed him all day overcame him. "He can't stay here!" he shouted.

"But he will stay here," declared the girl; "he will, I tell you!" Trembling with indignation her eyes blazed their hate. "You miserable cad! You sneaking poltroon! You—" She could go no further. The events of the past hour were too much for her, and she collapsed into a chair sobbing.

Hall was baffled. Leaning helplessly against the door, he watched the girl who was now crying softly. Outside he could hear the hungry Texans, who had been heaping maledictions upon the heads of the missing chuck-wagon drivers, cheer lustily

when the Chinese cook beat on the big triangle in token that beef and spuds were on the tables. Then an inspiration came to him and something like a sneering, triumphant smile came over his face as he revolved it over in his mind.

"Helen," he began slowly, "I will tell you the truth. I have tried to keep it from you; I have tried to spare your feelings,—but now the truth must be told. Thorpe is going to town—he has a friend outside that has come for him—in fact she demands him—the Sage-hen."

"It's false!" she cried, springing to her feet. "It's one of your lies."

Hall smiled sardonically. "Would you believe your eyes?" he asked.

The girl did not reply, but stood shaking with some new and strange emotion that came over her.

Her cousin walked into the adjacent room and pointed out of the window. "Look!" he jeered. "There she is in all her loveliness."

Slowly she followed him into the room, and then with a pounding heart she peered fearfully along his outstretched finger. She saw only the men crowding into the cook-house. "It's false! It's a lie!" she exclaimed. Even as her lips were uttering the words, she saw her cousin's malevolent face disappear behind the door, heard his exultant laugh, heard the key turn in the lock, and she knew she was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MUTINY.

In the cook-house the mercenaries were bolting their meal greedily, for they had had nothing since early morning. Conversation came spasmodically between swallows. Many talked but few appeared to listen. "It's been a hell of a day . . . Damned Winchester got jammed . . . He was game all right . . . First one didn't have no chance . . . Had a bucket in his hand—was goin' after water—dropped bucket and begins to run—didn't git far though . . . That little feller they call Horn claims to have got both of 'em—did git the last one—I seen him—he's a pizen little devil . . . More spuds this way, Chink . . . Where's all them rustlers?—we ain't seen but two or three . . . Gimme some more slumgullion, you slant-eyed hoss thief! . . . Looks like we ain't goin' to have no fun after all . . . There's one in the house—might have a necktie party after supper."

Captain Stanley looked at his watch. "Only a hour of daylight left," he said; "we orter be movin'."

In this Kennedy coincided. "We'll start in five

minutes," he said; "we got a plenty of work cut out fer us to-night. There's a couple of shacks to clean out on the way to town, and——"

A long, loud shriek came from the house. It was the terrified cry of a woman. For an instant not a man moved. Cups stopped halfway between mouth and table, knives and forks remained poised in mid air, and the men leaned forward and listened breathlessly. Again came the piercing cry, and then the effect was electrical.

"Set down!" shouted Lem Fulton. as the men sprang to their feet. "It ain't nothin'."

But the order was unheeded, for Texans are boastfully chivalrous, and these men who feared nothing on this earth below or in the heavens above, were no exception to the rule. Chairs, benches and tables were knocked over, and through the doors and windows the men streamed in a frantic race for the ranch-house. Captain Stanley was in the van. Two jumps behind him followed Shotgun Rawlins and Ben Fraser, and after them came Tex Allen, Wells-Fargo Findley, Curley Farris and others.

The Captain was the first man into the house. He saw a man leaning his weight against a door, while from the other side came a violent beating on the panels and the agonized scream of a woman. With a bound Stanley seized the man by the throat and sent him reeling across the room. An instant

later he had unlocked the door and Helen Sawyer staggered out with a face blanched with terror.

"Don't let them take him away!" she shrieked. "Don't let them take him away!" and she threw herself on her knees before the grizzled old fighter and raised her hands in supplication.

The Captain was dumbfounded. "There, there, little gal," he said, raising her up reassuringly. "I don't know what you want me to do, but by God what ever it is, I'll do it!"

"They are goin' to take him out and kill him," she cried, pointing to the lifeless form on the bed.

Instantly the Captain understood, but he hesitated not an instant.

"No they won't, little gal," he said gently. "I won't let 'em. We'll turn him over to the courts, and they'll put him in jail, maybe; but I'll see that the boys don't ha'm him none."

"*You* won't let 'em!" It was Kennedy's voice, cold and harsh. "When did *you* take charge?" he inquired with a sneer.

Stanley coolly surveyed the angry man a moment before replying.

"Look here, Kennedy," he said, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible, "you heered what I said—and that goes. Now it is your fu'st move."

Unconsciously the men arrayed themselves behind their leaders. At Kennedy's back stood Lem Fulton and the Idaho men, while Shotgun Rawlins,

Ponca Bill, and Tex Allen moved silently over by Stanley. With a cat-like stealth Tom Horn edged along the wall, but he stopped when he encountered the cold eye of Rawlins and heard the sinister double click of his weapon. There was a silence—intense, long-drawn, deadly, and nerves were strained almost to the breaking point. With drawn faces the men watched the leaders. All knew that with the slightest movement of either of them would come the deafening roar of weapons and the acrid reek of burnt powder. It was, as the Captain had said, Kennedy's first move. Yet he hesitated; and the men who knew him marveled. But in the big foreman's mind there was no indecision,—for when Helen Sawyer should step from between him and the man who had dared to oppose him, the matter was to be settled.

But the encounter was destined not to be, for a man noisily clattered up the porch steps and into the crowded room. It was Bill Forbes. Hatless, dust-covered, and almost breathless from hard riding, the man was beside himself with excitement.

"Kennedy!" he shouted, "the town is wild! Rowan and Angus are organizing a posse that will wipe you out—five or six hundred men at least. They may even now be on the way. Fort McKinne is your only hope! You must start at once."

"That's what I like to hear," said Stanley grimly.

"I come up here to fight, and not to go 'roun' pot-shottin' like a Injun."

"If they fetch the fight to us, it'll suit me," growled Kennedy.

As for Forbes's suggestion to seek the protection of Fort McKinne, neither man entertained it for a moment.

A slight movement of the form on the bed attracted Forbes's attention.

"Why, that's John Thorpe!" he exclaimed. "How did that rustler come here?"

Helen Sawyer confronted the man. "John Thorpe is *not* a rustler," she cried passionately. "And you know that he is not."

"Not a rustler? Gal did you say that he ain't a rustler?" demanded Stanley.

"Of course he's a rustler," put in Forbes loudly. "*I* know that he is."

Vaguely Thorpe heard the babel of voices about him; they sounded indistinct and far off. Then like one in a dream he heard Helen Sawyer's voice, vibrant with emotion cry out: "John Thorpe is not a rustler." Slowly his faculties returned, and then the pain from his broken arm distracted him until he heard Forbes's metallic voice assert: "Of course he's a rustler *I* know that he is."

With an effort he arose to a sitting position, and then he slowly and painfully climbed off the bed and stared bewilderingly at the dramatic scene that met

his gaze. In the gloom of the fast-deepening twilight, belligerently facing each other with their followers at their backs, were Kennedy and Stanley. Almost in the same attitude of defiance stood Helen Sawyer and Bill Forbes.

"I, a rustler?" queried Thorpe unsteadily. "Why no, I'm no rustler. Why, I haven't been out of New York city but a month. Surely you wouldn't call me a rustler. You are all strangers to me, boys, but I'll tell you I'm no rustler. Oh! but it was Mr. Forbes that called me a rustler," he went on disconnectedly. "I'll tell you, boys, why he says that I am a rustler. Listen, boys: it's because I'm going to put him in the penitentiary for forgery, and——"

"Damn you!" roared Forbes, and he rushed at the swaying figure, his face inflamed with passion.

But he never reached the object of his fury. A blue forty-five jabbed into the pit of his stomach by the muscular arm of Tex Allen deterred him, and with a sudden grunt he sank gasping and breathless to the floor.

"And Hall," continued Thorpe weakly; "is he here?" and he looked around the room. "Yes, I see him over there in the corner. Hall would like to see me branded a rustler, for I am going to send him along with Forbes for forging a will and defrauding his cousin out of her uncle's estate."

"It's a lie!" screamed Hall.

"Shut up!" commanded Stanley.

"I tell you, boys, you are all mistaken. There are no rustlers around here—only a few poor homesteaders who have filed upon——"

The words died away upon his lips and he fell into Ben Fraser's arms.

"He's fainted," announced Fraser. "Get some water."

"What 'bout what he said 'bout these here people not bein' rustlers, Kennedy?" demanded Stanley.

Before the question could be answered there was a distant rattle of rifle shots.

"I told you!" ejaculated Forbes, his face paling with a sudden fear. "It's the posse!"

A Texan rushed excitedly into the room. "The hills is alive with men," he cried, "and they are shootin' the hosses."

"We will settle our differences afterwards, Stanley; we got to fight now."

The Captain nodded. "A fight is what I come for," he returned curtly.

There was a sudden jaggling of broken window glass, and a bullet buried itself in the logs on the opposite side of the room.

"How we goin' to git this lady out of here?" asked Kennedy, turning to his employer.

"Let her stay here," pleaded that individual, his

teeth chattering with fear, "perhaps they won't shoot into the house so much if she remains."

An oath was the big foreman's only response.

"Men get the best positions you can, and don't waste your shells," shouted Stanley.

The riflemen on the hills had now gotten the range and horses were falling fast. It was sickening. The uninjured galloped wildly about the corral; the wounded screamed shrilly; and the dying brutes silently rolled their eyes in an agony of pain.

Kennedy motioned to the girl. "You git a white sheet, and I'll take you out of here under a flag of truce," he said gruffly.

"I will stay here with him," she said, pointing to the injured man on the bed, "and if any are wounded, I will attend them."

A look of admiration shone in the big foreman's face for an instant, and then with a shrug of his broad shoulders he turned on his heel and went about preparing for the death struggle to come.

The firing on both sides had now become incessant, and those in the ranch-house were careful to avoid the windows for the occasional crash and shower of broken glass showed that among the beseigers there were marksmen of no mean ability. From the upper windows and from the stables and bunk-houses the beseiged replied with spirit.

In a corner, the picture of abject fear, cowered Hall. The very fates seemed to have conspired against him. His plot to defraud his cousin had been exposed and the prison gates yawned before him; but for the present these things were as trifles, for now his precious life was in danger. Bitterly he reproached himself. "Why did I ever come out to this ungodly country!" he groaned. For a long time the unhappy man sat, shivering with terror afresh at every unexpected volley, and then he suddenly thought of the telegram to Colonel Van Horn. In the excitement of the afternoon he had forgotten it, and now as he anxiously searched his pockets he felt a gleam of hope. "Yes, it's here," he mumbled; "but how can it be delivered?"

Timidly he looked about. Stanley and Kennedy he knew would have none of it; Buck Harris or Lem Fulton would hardly brave the scorn of the leaders; Tom Horn he would not trust. Despair siezed him again, and then his eye fell on Dutch Cooper.

"Cooper," he called tremulously, "come here."

The cowpuncher looked at him contemptuously for a moment and then reluctantly crossed the room to where the frightened man sat.

"Cooper," whispered Hall, "do you want to make five hundred dollars?"

"Sure," replied that individual, with a sudden cheerfulness.

"If you take this note to Colonel Van Horn, Cooper, I'll give you five hundred dollars."

Cooper regarded the young man suspiciously—it seemed too easy.

"I'll give you two hundred now, and three hundred more after you have delivered the message," insisted Hall eagerly. "You do it Cooper. Please do," he pleaded. "The posse won't stop you, even if they see you. They know you," Then with a sudden inspiration he added: "It's not myself that I am thinking of, Cooper—it's my cousin."

The cowboy pondered reflectively. In bygone days his poker comrades had often chided him about his inability to get more money out of an invincible hand, and now as he looked down on the pale, fear-distorted face, the conviction surged over him that this was the psychological moment and he determined to play the opportunity for all possible profit.

"Oh I don't know," he said, yawning indifferently. "I ain't stuck none on gittin' shot up. And anyhow seven fifty would be a better price."

Hall accepted the advanced price with an alacrity that made Cooper almost weep. "I'll give you four hundred now, and three hundred and fifty tomorrow," he said quickly.

"You give me seven fifty now, so if I git killed you won't owe me nothin'," haggled Cooper, illog-

ically. And then as Hall hesitated for a moment, Cooper, eager to call the bargain off in the hopes of driving one at a higher figure, started to walk away. "O, if you don't want to do it, why all right. Maybe you'd rather go yourself and save a lot of money."

"Wait. I'll do it," groaned Hall, and he pulled a wallet from his inside pocket and stripping off eight crisp one hundred dollar bills placed them in Cooper's itching palm. "I haven't the correct amount; there's fifty dollars due me," he said, as he rapidly counted out the money.

"I'll bring you your change—if you keep your health," grinned Cooper, "and if you don't, you won't care."

Hall shuddered. It was evident that the jest was far from entertaining.

"It's dark and you had better start right away," he urged.

As the cowboy prepared to go, a delerium of apprehension came over the terror-stricken man. A thousand misgivings arose in his naturally suspicious mind. Would Cooper fail him? Would he allow himself to be captured by the besiegers, and the precious telegram taken from him? Would he go to the Fort at all, or would he ride into town and spend his newly acquired wealth? It was plain to Hall that he must offer some new inducement.

"Cooper," he whined, "if you deliver that note, I'll give you two hundred more."

"It's a bet," agreed the cowpuncher, and with that he crept out of the darkened house and out into the impenetrable gloom of the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED TO DUTCH COOPER.

ALTHOUGH it was near midnight and an hour before moonrise, the stars shone brightly and Cooper, as he stepped from the ranch-house door, dropped hastily to his knees, Rapidly he crawled across the bare space to the friendly shelter of the corral, and then squirming through the gate he rose to a crouching position and made his way over and around the dead horses until the fence at the end of the enclosure loomed before him. To the right was the bunk-house, to the left a stable; each, he knew, harbored a dozen or more marksmen. The corral fence was six feet high and Cooper realized the danger of climbing over it in the presence of so many watchful eyes; yet there was no other way. In the starlight he could see that the door of the bunk-house was wide open, and through it could almost feel the searching scrutiny of those within. For an hour he lay in the deep shadow of the fence and listened to the occasional boom of rifles on the hill-top; then nerving himself, he grasped the topmost rail and with a quick bound vaulted over and flattened himself on the ground

on the other side. Almost at the same instant the barrel of a Winchester was shoved through the bunk-house door and a stream of fire told him that he had been discovered and was being fired upon by the very men he was endeavoring to save.

"I got him!" he heard a voice say, and then his blood ran cold as he heard some of the others express their doubts. Hotly the argument waged and snatches of it drifted out through the doorway and fell upon the ears of the man in the shadow of the fence.

"I tell you I couldn't miss him," Cooper heard the shooter declare, "I had him right on my sights."

Had the excited Texan thought to lower his rear sight from eight hundred yards where he had placed it late that afternoon, he undoubtedly would have spoken the truth and Cooper's part in "the rustler war" would have been over.

With his heart beating tempestuously the daring cowpuncher burrowed into the sand by the fence, better to escape the bullets which the doubting Texans might send his way, and also to protect himself from the fire of the besiegers, for now he was between the lines. From the encircling hills came dull red flashes followed by the angry whing of bullets as they sped over his head and buried themselves in the walls of the houses. Occasionally there were replies, too, from the besieged,

and then the rifle reports seemed at his very ear and the sulphurous fumes of gunpowder vividly impressed him of his peril.

To attempt to go back was almost certain death; to show himself or to call aloud was to invite a volley from both sides; plainly there was but one thing to do, one course to pursue, and that was onward, —and at once, for a faint glare on the horizon told him that the moon would soon appear over the hill-top. Slowly and cautiously he dragged himself from the shadow of the fence and out into the open. Six hundred yards away were the rifle-pits of the posse,—and beyond that deliverance. An hour passed and he had only covered a dozen yards. Flat upon the ground he dragged himself, each moment expecting discovery, for not a stick or a stone over the intervening space obstructed the vision of four hundred pairs of keen, searching, pitiless eyes. With the cunning of an Indian he undulated, snakelike, over the bullet swept hill-side. Watching the flare of the guns, he changed his direction a dozen times, and as many times did he despair of escape. A slight *aroya* now offered him shelter and along this he made rapid progress, but at the end of a hundred yards the ravine vanished and he was again upon the smooth, shelterless hill-side. The beseiging line was now less than two hundred yards distant, and he determined to pierce it. It was a desperate chance for the moon

was now high in the heavens, and he could hear the men's voices as they called to one another from their various positions on the firing line. He had traversed half of the coveted space when his straining eyes saw that a line of rifle pits barred his advance, and he was obliged to retreat as cautiously again to the *aroya*. For a long time he lay in the gully listening to the men above him, hoping to hear some friendly voice; but none came to him, and then with a resolution born of despair he determined to turn off to the right and press onward, come what may.

Warily crawling from his concealment he again pulled and dragged himself towards the hill-top. In an hour he had made up the ground he had lost, and a large boulder some sixty yards in front of him seemed to beckon shelter and deliverance. This was now his goal; if he could but reach it, escape seemed certain. A reddening in the eastern sky spurred him onward, for with daylight would come certain discovery, and with that would come —he knew not what. Deviously he wriggled over the few remaining yards, and then as he finally reached the protecting shadow of the rock he breathed a sigh of relief and lay exhausted for a moment at its base. He was safe at last. He felt sure that he could mingle with the attacking forces without fear and he resolved to impress a horse at the first opportunity and press on to Ft. Mc-

Kinne. With this plan in mind he rose boldly to his feet and started to the rear. But escape was not to be, for as he walked around the boulder he was confronted by a cool stranger with a leveled six-shooter who unceremoniously relieved him of his weapon.

"Stick 'em up!" was the command.

Instantly Cooper's hands went into the air and he stood silent and resigned.

"I been watchin' you fer a hour," remarked the stranger, "and I'd a plunked you long ago, only shootin' is too good fer you."

Several men came up and looked the unhappy Cooper over with, what seemed to him, a cheerful curiosity not in keeping with their grim purpose.

"Git a rope, Ike," ordered the captor, "and we'll git shed of one of these here varmits right away."

"What are you goin' to hang him to, Ed?" inquired Ike, with a grin. "They ain't a tree big 'nough closter than ten mile."

"Well damned if you ain't right," agreed Ed, suddenly appreciating that fact.

Ed was chagrined. For an hour it had been a pet scheme of his—this hanging—and now as it dawned upon him that he must forego this pleasure for the lack of a tree, he cursed volubly, while Ike stood by grinning and enjoying his discomfiture. Of the prisoner, neither had a thought.

"Well then," petulantly declared Ed, "I'll fix this here feller's clock with old Betsy here," and he recocked his revolver.

Then turning to the luckless and unresisting Cooper, he wheeled him about and backed him up against the rock.

"Now then," he said, with a business-like air, "when you git to hell, tell them that I am a comin'."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SIEGE.

THE attacking force was nominally under the command of Sheriff Angus, but the real leader was Arapahoe Rowan—one of those natural military geniuses which the frontier, in emergencies, has never failed to produce.

Grimly Rowan disposed his riflemen to points of vantage surrounding the ranch-house. He organized his force into day and night shifts, for he purposed that there should be no cessation of gun-fire, and during the night he caused a circle of rifle-pits to be dug four hundred yards from the enemy's defences. Then he waited impatiently for daylight.

Only once did the expression of relentless determination fade from the stern visage of the leader, and that was upon the augmentation of his forces in the persons of Doc Richards and Uncle Billy.

"What can we do to help you, Mr. Rowan?" inquired Uncle Billy. There was a pathetic note of eagerness in the old man's voice that caused the coldly resolute eyes of the leader to soften to a more kindly light.

"I'll take keer of the eatin' arrangements, if you say so," put in Doc Richards.

A ghost of a smile flickered across Rowan's seamed and rugged face at the offer of assistance, for he saw at a glance that both the old cronies were weaponless.

"I have plenty of money, Mr. Rowan," continued Uncle Billy, earnestly. "Call on me for anything you want."

"Well," replied Rowan soberly, "you might look over that big catalog of that Chicago mail-order house, that Doc has, and order me a cannon."

History has it that it was Arapahoe Rowan's only joke. He would have recalled it if he could, for as he saw the wounded, crestfallen look come over Uncle Billy's face, he turned on his heel not a little ashamed.

"A cannon," he muttered to himself, "Why not?"

Quickly tearing a leaf from an old brand-book which he had, he indited a note to Zeb Hardy, the blacksmith, ordering him to produce a cannon forthwith. Then summoning a cowboy he dispatched the missive to town at break-neck speed.

There was no rest for the indefatigable leader; tirelessly he rode back and forth along the firing line. All night long, at his direction, intermittent flashes of flame flickered on the hill-tops like fireflys on a summer evening, and the dull booming of the heavy rifles fell upon the ears of the besieged Texans as depressingly as the tolling of funeral bells.

Daylight came at last and Rowan urged his jaded horse along the ridges, his eye eagerly intent upon every strategic rise or depression of the ground which would afford cover for an advance. Suddenly the sound of loud voices fell upon his ears and putting spurs to his horse he came upon three men. One of them had a rifle in his hands, another a six-shooter, while the third with his back against a large boulder held his hands aloft, evidently a prisoner.

"Here! What does this mean?" demanded the leader, pulling his horse up sharply.

The man with the pistol looked up at him indifferently. "Why, I jest ketched one of them killers," he drawled, "and I'm going to put him out of business—that's all. But I don't see what business it is of yourn," he added coolly.

Such a reply to Rowan was like fire to gunpowder, and before the stranger knew what had happened the leader's nervous cayuse, urged by inch-long rowels, had knocked him sprawling, and when he had regained his feet a heavy calibre six-shooter was staring him in the face.

Rowan's face was livid. "I'm runnin' this fight," he declared, "and if you as much as bat an eye I'll put you out of it!"

The prisoner who had been standing dazedly with his hands in the air now sprang forward. "Arapahoe Rowan!" he exclaimed delightedly.

"Arapahoe Rowan?" ejaculated the crestfallen stranger. "Well that sure is one on me. You see I ride for the double H outfit up on Tongue river and I didn't know you," he explained apologetically.

Rowan contemptuously replaced his weapon and turned to the fugitive: "Cooper, how'd this happen? Tell me."

"I was jest a gittin' away from that Texas outfit, when this here feller stuck me up, and I reckon if you hadn't a come along he'd a fixed me for sure," replied Cooper.

Rowan eyed him suspiciously. "Why didn't you come away from them yesterday?"

"Couldn't—they wouldn't let me," explained Cooper plausibly.

"Well I don't know what your game is, but you ain't a goin' to leave." And with this Rowan conducted the unhappy fugitive back to headquarters, a wagon, where he instructed his subordinates to stop any attempt at escape, and as such an order had but one interpretation, Cooper climbed into the wagon and resignedly folded his arms in token of submission.

With daylight came a steady stream of reinforcements. Citizens of Buffalo, settlers, and dust-covered punchers from ranches fifty miles away flocked to the scene, and every recruit had a rifle and at least one six-shooter. Many miles away ex-

cited cowboys were hastily cinching saddles, and stay-at-homes were sick at heart. The countenances of some of the men, those who had known Champion and Ray, bespoke a deadly hatred for the invaders; but with the others the affair was quite impersonal, and yet though they were fighting merely for the "fun of the thing" their reckless, dare-devil bravery was none the less. Some were to come from ranches over a hundred miles away, for the fight promised more joy to those excitment-loving men than any other event in the history of Wyoming. To them it was a glorious holiday, not to be compared to any barbecue, picnic, or roping-contest in all their experience.

A shirt for a flag, snapping in the breeze from a long pole tied to the wagon wheel indicated headquarters, and it was to this point that the new arrivals were attracted.

"*Yip! yip! yip!*" they whooped as they dashed along an exposed bit of the road, and again they yelled rapturously when the bullets kicked up the dust about them.

"I rid a hundred mile to see a hangin' onct," shouted an excited puncher, "but damn me if I wouldn't come a thousand to see this," and he immediately pulled his Winchester from its sheath and began to pump it as fast as he could pull the trigger.

"Gee, this is fine!" exclaimed another. "But

I do hope they won't git 'em all before Sam gits here," he added earnestly, which remark showed that he was unselfish.

A loud shout now announced the arrival of a crowd of men with two wagons.

"We come on 'em at Beaver crick, standin' in the middle of the road," explained one of the newcomers to Rowan. "They was all hitched up—I guess the drivers took to the hills," he added regretfully.

The horses were soon unhitched and many willing hands assisted in unloading the wagons of their stores. Boxes of ammunition were thrown out and eagerly broken open; and then came flour, bacon, canned goods, and finally an energetic cowboy with a large stone knocked the lid off the last box and exposed some long cylindrical packages, somewhat larger than candles, and wrapped in yellow, oiled paper.

"Lookout!" suddenly yelled Dutch Cooper, who had been interestedly watching the opening of the boxes from his seat in the headquarters wagon. "Lookout!" he repeated, "that's *dynamite!*"

The stone dropped from the hand of the cowboy and the crowd surged back.

"How do you know that's dynamite, Cooper?" inquired Rowan sharply.

"Cause I used to be 'powder-man' on the rail-

road onct," returned Cooper, proud of his knowledge.

"Well then we'll use you to shake up them houses in a little bit," remarked the leader.

Cooper turned pale. "Why I couldn't do it. Fact is I disremember how to work the blame stuff," he protested.

"You'll remember, all right," retorted Rowan, "when the time comes. And you're goin' to do it too," he added, with an ominous snap of his square jaws.

The explosive was removed to a safe place and the crowd returned to the shooting. All morning it kept up, but without visible results. It was noticed that the reply came only from the stables and the bunk and cook-houses, and Rowan, after being told that the house harbored a woman, gallantly ordered the fire to be concentrated upon the other buildings.

At meal-times the besiegers were given a real treat, for then it was that the invaders made a dash to the cook-house, and a short time afterwards back again to their posts. As it was all of fifty yards from the stables and bunk-houses to where their meal awaited them, the Texans were exposed to the fire of the posse for six or seven seconds. This thrice-daily performance was highly gratifying to the besieging force, and the men took

their stands and waited as patiently as duck-hunters.

"Hi! here they come!" yelled a watching cow-boy, as the Texans by twos and threes streamed out of the cook-house for their various posts, and for several minutes there was a din of firearms, a defiant yell from the valley below, and then silence only broken by desultory firing.

Late in the afternoon Zeb Hardy arrived with his cannon, a ponderous affair of which he was not a little proud, and which he had constructed after eighteen hours of hard wark. It was made of a large iron pipe, reinforced with wood and bands of tire steel, and mounted upon a heavy carriage of wagon wheels.

At the sight of this wicked-looking engine of destruction, the men cheered enthusiastictlly, whereat the blacksmith swelled visibly. "Thar she is," he said confidently, "and if she don't everlastin'ly lambast the daylights out of them there houses—why I miss my guess, that's all."

The cannon was painstakingly loaded with powder, rags, and about a half peck of scrap iron, which Hardy had thoughtfully brought along, and then laboriously dragged to the top of the hill and pointed. Rowan touched the fuse and the crowd disappeared over the hill-top with startling alacrity. There was a moment of suspense, a terrific report, and the cannon dissipated into thin air, save the car-

riage, which flew back over the hill as though projected from some giant catapult. Zeb Hardy had missed his guess.

The derisive yells of the Texans nettled Rowan and he swore savagely. "Wait," he muttered; "the fight has just commenced."

The need of more effective methods was apparent, and all the long night the leader sat with his back against the wagon wheel and stared across the valley with unseeing eyes. Rifles flashed and the reports rolled and echoed back to him, but he saw not nor did not hear. He was thinking, thinking hard. A score of plans he revolved in his mind, but by morning he had given them all up and had returned to his first love, that old and time-tried device of the frontier, the go-devil.

Hardly had the eastern sky began to flush with approaching day when wagons and men were dispatched to wreck the nearest cabin and to bring back the logs of which it was built. By noon the men had returned and the construction of the go-devil began. The two captured wagons were placed side by side, and across the back ends was lashed a barricade of logs. Plainly it was a device invented centuries before—as old, perhaps, as the human race—the *ribaudequin* of the ancients, an instrument of war which had played its part in the fall of empires. Rapidly it was fashioned into a moving fort which would shelter a half

score of the attacking force and enable them to safely approach to the very wall of the enemy. By the middle of the afternoon the go-devil was completed and Rowan had selected ten men from the four hundred volunteers, and had placed them at the loop-holes behind it.

"Now git that dynamite and Dutch Cooper," he shouted, "and we'll start."

But Dutch Cooper had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXX.

PRIVATE Mullane, short, fat, and Irish, walked methodically back and forth across the parade. Sentinel duty was all a part of a day's work with Mullane, but nevertheless he continued to glance wistfully in the direction of the canteen, for within the seven-up tournament waged, an event of such consuming interest that the mind of the garrison had but scant thought for the protection of the Nation.

And why should it have been otherwise? The states of the Union were in a condition of profound peace with the nations of the world, and with each other; the Siouxs, Cheyennes, Crows, and Blackfeet, like all good Indians were contentedly devouring the government ration upon their own reservations; and yet the inexorable, and to Mullane absurd, army regulations demanded that same vigilance as had Fort McKinne been menaced by some invading army.

But an invading army *was* menacing the post; even now it was within pistol shot, and had the sentinel but have turned his head he would have seen it,—two men in a wagon.

"It's the first time I ever set out to steal any-

thing," Uncle Billy was saying; "but it's just nacherly up to us to do it. First we will drive aroun' by them cotton-woods—there's a stack of them cannon-balls there."

A "pyramid" would have been a better word, but to the old gambler everything came in stacks.

"Are they heavy?" inquired Doc Richards solicitously, for he, while patriotic enough, was decided adverse to manual labor.

"I reckon they weigh 'bout ten poun' apiece," replied Uncle Billy, "and I figure that twenty of 'em will do. And that makes an even stack, too," he added, again unconsciously reverting to poker terms.

It was the work of but few minutes to load the balls into the wagon.

"Now, drive down by the parade and we'll get a cannon," commanded Uncle Billy.

"There's liable to be one of them blue-coats aroun'," grumbled his companion.

"Never mind, we'll get it all right," promised Uncle Billy, confidently. "Anything can be did by a bold front—poker learns us that."

Reluctantly Richards complied. And it was as he had foretold; a blue-coated sentinel marched backward and forward past the coveted cannon, never losing sight of it for an instant.

Three miles down the valley Mullane could see the scattering houses of Buffalo. "And pay-day a

week off!" he sighed. Mullane was hungering for a night in town—a night of pleasurable excitement—a night of whiskey and cards and riotous enjoyment at the dance-hall. All too few, those nights, thought Mullane. Many times and oft had the private's thirteen dollars disappeared into the insatiable maw of the gambling house's money-drawer within the first and only ten minutes of his orgie; but Hope beats strongest within the Celtic breast—the next time would be different. Indeed Mullane's plans were already laid: a few lucky turns with the dice first; and then he would try that invincible system, that he had thought out, on the wheel; from the wheel he would turn to faro, and already he could see the sad-faced dealer passing over the bank-roll. He was just buying the customary number of drinks for everybody, when the noise of an approaching wagon rudely interrupted his day-dream.

"Howdy," greeted Uncle Billy, climbing out over the wheel.

Mullane nodded.

Without parley or explanation the old man began tieing the rope to the cannon, and as the sentinel watched his clumsy efforts he grinned and then good-naturedly superintended the work.

"What aire ye goin' to do with it?" he asked, idly curious.

"Goin' to take her to town," replied Uncle Billy briefly.

Mullane rubbed his chin.

"Little celebration," put in Doc Richards. "Fourth of July, you know."

The trusty minion of Uncle Sam removed his cap and scratched his head doubtfully. "Begorra yer startin' early," he remarked. Then he looked into the wagon. "What the divil ye got there? Cannon balls, by all the saints!"

The culprits exchanged apprehensive glances.

"Ye got orders for this?" demanded Mullane.

"We sure have," answered Richards.

"From who?"

"From er—from er—from the Superintendent of Cannon," put in Uncle Billy shamelessly.

"Superintendent of Cannon?" queried Mullane. "You mean the Chafe of Ordinance and Side Arms, don't ye?"

The old man fell into the trap. "Yes," he agreed, eagerly, "that's the feller."

"Well, there's no such a person," replied Mullane triumphantly. "Come to the guardhouse, ye divils," he commanded, cocking his rifle, "and maybe ye can explain it to the corporal."

There was no escape. To the guardhouse they marched. Behind them, with fixed bayonet and loaded rifle, walked Mullane, who ever and anon

voiced his hope that the prisoners might attempt to escape.

At the guardhouse the corporal was incredulous, astounded, and enraged—all in quick succession. He promised them a military execution, confinement for life, and other things not necessary to mention, all of which he expressed the hope that he might be allowed to attend to, personally.

They were soon, however, removed to the commandant's office.

"Well Uncle Billy," said Colonel Van Horn, "what is this I hear?"

To tell the truth was not the old man's purpose. Vengeance glowed in his breast; he was resolved that the invaders should reap the whirlwind. So far, only the vaguest rumors regarding the "range war" had reached the post; the truth might bring about untimely interference by the authorities.

"You see, Colonel," he began, "it's all on account of a bet. Me and Doc had an argument 'bout cannon shootin', and I bet Doc that he couldn't hit the side of a barn at fifty yards, and so we comes up and borrows that there old gun of yours and——"

"Uncle Billy," interrupted the Colonel, "you are not a good liar. Don't try. Now tell the truth."

The old man hung his head. "You are right," he mumbled, "I'm not a good liar. The truth, I won't tell you—I won't, I won't."

"What's the cause of all this tom-foolery?" demanded the Colonel, impatiently turning upon the other prisoner. "Taking government property is a serious offence. Why did you do it?"

To this there was no reply for Doc Richards had seemingly lost the power of speech. From an expressionless face, Richard's eyes protruded in a glassy stare, and had it not been for his steady asthmatic breathing, he might have been taken for some uncanny wax figure.

The Colonel turned sadly to the corporal and was about to order the prisoners returned to the guard-house when suddenly there was a clatter of heavy boots in the uncarpeted hallway outside, the door was unceremoniously thrown open, and a stranger appeared before the startled men. At a glance of the dust-covered, sweat-streaked countenance they saw that the man was wild with excitement. It was Dutch Cooper.

"Quick! quick!" he yelled. "They'll all be killed!—house surrounded—five hundred of 'em—all shootin'!"

"The Siouxs?" cried the Colonel, springing to his feet.

"No, no," shouted Cooper. "White men, *white men,* WHITE MEN."

Realizing that the hysterical man was about to collapse, the Colonel gently led him to a chair.

"Now my man," he said, "tell me where and who these men are."

"WS ranch—Arapahoe Rowan and 'bout five hundred others."

"Range war?"

Cooper nodded exhaustedly.

"I thought it would come!" exclaimed the Colonel, pacing the floor agitatedly. "I thought it would come—and I am powerless—I can do nothing, nothing. "He turned to Uncle Billy as though for sympathy. "If I only had the authority!" he cried. "If I only had! Federal troops cannot act in matters of this kind without orders from the War Department, which are only issued at the request of the state authorities," he explained.

"Wait!" Cooper was feeling in the bosom of his shirt. "Here!" and he pulled out a soiled yellow envelope.

The Colonel snatched it from his hand and hastily opened it. A glance was sufficient.

Washington, D. C.

Colonel J. J. Van Horne,

Commandant Ft. McKinne, Wyo.

Sir:— Take such force as you may deem necessary and put down all such riot and disorder in Johnson county as may be existing.

Jno. R. Brooks, Brig. Gen.

"Sound boots and saddles," shouted the Colonel.

A minute later and a shrill bugle pulsated its

thrilling alarm across the parade, and then pandemonium reigned. Pell-mell the men tumbled out of barracks, mess-hall, and canteen, all joining in a mad race for the stables

Uncle Billy turned to his accomplice, who had been watching the sudden activity in open-eyed wonder. "I think it is time to go," he whispered.

When the excited corporal came to himself and began to look for his prisoners, he was just in time to see their wagon disappear amid the cottonwoods, Doc Richards lashing the horses and Uncle Billy throwing out cannon-balls.

Twenty minutes later three troops of cavalry galloped across the parade and turned off down the road. At their head rode Colonel Van Horn and some of his officers; trailing ominously in the dust at the rear of the column was a gatling and an ambulance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FINISH.

A NIGHT, a day, and another night had passed, and now the hollow eyes and drawn faces of men who have long gone without sleep began to show themselves among the defenders of the ranch-house. Water and provisions were low; of ammunition there seemed hardly enough to last another day. It was apparent to the stoutest-hearted of them that the end was near. But there was no thought of surrender. It would have taken a brave man indeed, to have even suggested such a thing. It was a "tight place" the men admitted, but they had all been in tight places before, and so, with the fatalistic indifference of the true fighting man, they accepted the situation with hardly a shrug of their shoulders.

During the night the invaders strengthened their defences. The corral was torn down and the timbers used to barricade doors and windows. Loopholes, too, were cut through the walls at advantageous places, and trenches were dug connecting the various buildings with each other. Then they waited, resolved that when the supreme moment

came that they would give a good account of themselves, or, in the words of one of them, "go out in a blaze of glory."

The sun rose upon a perfect day, and through the clear morning air the invaders could plainly see the swarm of men upon the hill-tops bent upon their destruction. More ominous still were the rifle-pits dug during the night, half-way down the hill-side and within three hundred yards of the ranch-house. Hall saw these things, too, for since dawn he had been straining his eyes towards the rim of the valley in a vain hope that Dutch Cooper might have succeeded in reaching Fort McKinne. Once during the morning dust clouds of approaching horsemen caused him to spring to his feet in a frenzy of joy; but he was doomed to disappointment, for at that moment Dutch Cooper sat resignedly a prisoner in the headquarters wagon on the hill.

Hall was the only diversion the fighting men had, and they made the most of him.

"Say, feller," remarked Mr. Wells-Fargo Finley, "you are the only man here what's a hiding in the house. Why don't you take a rifle and try to git some of 'em up there on the hill?"

"Oh, I can't shoot," protested the erstwhile leader.

"Well you had better learn how," put in Shotgun Rawlins, "fer them fellers are a goin' to come a prancin' down here before long, and then what

are you a goin' to do? It's a funny thing," he continued reflectively, "that these here Wyomin' punchers most always shoot a feller through the stomach—it's their fav-o-rite place."

Hall groaned aloud. Whereat Mr. Finley and Mr. Rawlins exchanged grinning glances, picked up their weapons, and departed cheerfully for their posts in the stable.

As the morning wore on the fire from the rifle-pits increased, and with the shorter range come a deadly accuracy. A few minutes before noon a Texan was killed in the stable. He was buried where he fell, and the only obsequies were a few lauditory remarks by his friends. "He was a good man," commented Stanley. "Pore feller, he had to come way up here in Wyomin' to git his'n."

It was not the occasional rifle-ball that thudded against the wall of her room that caused the cheek of Helen Sawyer to blanche, for her staunch New England courage had been the subject of unbounded admiration of all the fighting men; it was the menacing glances of Bill Forbes and Tom Horn that frightened her, for she trembled for the safety of the man she loved. As the cordon of the besieging forces drew closer and capture seemed more certain, she knew that the life of John Thorpe, whose testimony might convict these men, was becoming more and more in peril. Resolutely she sat on guard at his bedside; at times the desire for sleep

was almost overpowering, and then some strange apprehension would come over her, and looking up she would encounter the cold, malicious scrutiny of Bill Forbes, or the furtive and sinister glances of Tom Horn. Well she knew that these desperate men dared anything, and that should her back be turned for an instant a ball from Tom Horn's revolver might easily be attributed to a bullet from the outside. In her dilemma she confided in Shotgun Rawlins. It was Mr. Rawlins's proud boast that he had never refused a lady a favor; and in this particular Helen Sawyer was no exception. Rawlins listened patiently to what the girl had to say, and then picking up his weapon rose briskly. "I'll go and kill both of 'em," he said, with simple brevity. And then to his amazement the girl objected. But Mr. Rawlins once determined was hard to swerve—his duty seemed clear. He argued, begged, and plead, but the girl was tearfully stubborn. "She's too deep fer *me,*" he told Tex Allen; "she shore is." Rawlins left, but not, however, until he had a few cold, dispassionate, but nevertheless forceful words with the two men whom Helen feared.

It was late in the afternoon when there was a noticeable slackening in the enemy's fire. It was the first respite the garrison had had for many hours, and most of the men sought the sleep which had so long been denied them. Tex Allen, however,

with great magnanimity, took this opportunity to console Hall with the cheering thought that he could be hung but once; whereat Mr. Curley Farris described the terrorized man's probable taking-off with exceeding pleasure and an infinite regard for detail. "Now you take a tough ole bull neck like Tex's there, and they ain't no give ner stretch to it —and that's what flusters a feller; but your'n," and Farris drew his horny palm critically across Hall's throat, "why shucks, that'll bust right off— no trouble 't'all." How long this delectable entertainment would have continued is difficult to say, had not a murmur of excitement come from the watchers at the loopholes.

Over the hill-top a strange device slowly loomed into view, and for a moment the invaders watched it curiously. As the thing mounted the hill-crest and deviously began its descent down the barren slope, the Texans saw and understood—it was the go-devil. The two chuck-wagons, once their own property, were lashed together, side by side, and at the back ends was secured the barricade of logs. It was this moving fortification that was being moved backward down the hill and into the valley below. Four men at the wagon tongues guided the unwieldly structure, and ten marksmen at as many loopholes crouched with ready weapons. The supreme movement had arrived.

"Now men," shouted Kennedy, "if we can't stop them wagons,—why it's our finish."

There was a storm of bullets from the beseiging forces, and the real battle was on. A hundred rifles concentrated their fire upon the go-devil, but on it came, straight as an arrow flies at its mark, and as surely and as relentlessly as fate. From the rifle-pits a hail of lead splintered the loopholes of the ranch-house, but the Texans, with a desperate courage, stuck to their posts and pumped their Winchesters until the barrels of their weapons burned their hands. Onward through the dense white smoke lurched the go-devil. The well-nigh frantic efforts of the invaders to stop it seemed without effect.

A keen eye now might have detected an unexpected excitement among the spectators and pistol men on the hills. They had turned their backs and seemed to be looking in the opposite direction. Then suddenly over the brow of the nearest hill came a cavalcade of horsemen. That it was no disordered mob was plain, for it was proceeding in column formation and at a brisk trot. Flashes of light from drawn sabers glinted on the afternoon sun, and then above the noise of the conflict in the valley below came the clear, penetrating flare of a bugle "*ta ta-ta,*" column right.

Alfred Hall sprang to his feet. "The soldiers!" he cried. "Saved! Saved at last!" And Helen

Sawyer looking up at his face, distorted in its ecstacy, shuddered with loathing.

There was a sudden cessation of gun-fire and the men in the rifle-pits hastily scrambled out and hurried after the soldiers. As the cavalry neared the bunk-houses, column into line was quickly executed, and then "*ta*" came the staccato note from the bugle and the troopers drew rein. Colonel Van Horn rode forward and Kennedy stepped from the ranch-house to meet him. To have surrendered to his enemy, the sheriff's posse, would have been a disgrace unspeakable; but to yield to the blue of the army, somehow seemed to Kennedy vastly different.

"You men are under arrest!" said the Colonel.

Kennedy nodded impassively, and then as he turned and saw the yelling, shouting, gesticulating mob that was now approaching, the old light of conflict flamed in his eyes.

In the van of the mob rode Arapahoe Rowan, calm, cool, unemotional. Behind him surged the cursing possemen. All semblance of order and discipline had disappeared and there were loud cries for vengeance. One man had a rope. "Lynch 'em!" he howled.

The next instant there was a flash of steel, and a thud of metal to skull as Rowan smote the man insensible to the dust.

"The next man what hollers that," thundered

Rowan, "I'll kill! This fight is over, and the law will take its course."

Quickly the invaders were disarmed by the troopers, and then amid the glowering scowls of the disappointed mob, they were loaded into wagons and driven off to the more hospitable guardhouse of Fort McKinne.

It was all done so quickly that it seemed like a dream to Thorpe and Helen. Half supported by the girl he hobbled out on the porch and watched the excited crowd of strangers who now thronged the premises curiously examining the many battle-scars of the stout defences, and among them all he saw not a familiar face.

It was Uncle Billy who first discovered them.

"Why Johnny! my boy! my boy!" and the old man fairly rushed on Thorpe and threw his arms about him. "And you ain't dead after all!" he cried, hugging him as though to remove any lingering doubt. "And the lady, too! God bless her!" and he clasped her hands in both of his, and as he turned his face Thorpe saw tears of happiness stream slowly down the grizzled cheeks, and then it was that the young man felt an awkward lump in his throat.

There is nothing coldly dispassionate about a mob. These same men, who but a few moments before were clamoring for frontier justice, now swung to the other extreme of human emotion, and

with one accord the five hundred cowpunchers, gamblers, bartenders, and unattached, rushed upon the embarassed young man to grasp him by the hand and to express their pleasure at his survival.

"It's Johnny Thorpe!" they shouted. "Hurrah fer him! Hurrah fer the New York Kid! Speech! Speech!"

Willing hands seized the young man and hustled him to the front of the porch.

"Men," began Thorpe, as he looked over the crowd of grinning, expectant faces, "I want to thank you for your good behaviour this afternoon." Here, although their behaviour had not been good, the crowd cheered lustily in recognition of its own virtue. "It is always best," continued Thorpe, "that the Law should be allowed to prevail." More cheers interrupted the speaker. "Now that the disorder has been put down, I feel that we are to have, at last, an era of peace and security in this valley. The day of the 'big fellow,' and his arogant and sometimes criminal way, is over. As for the WS ranch, if Uncle Billy will tell what he did with a certain long, blue envelope given him late one afternoon about a year ago by Nate Champion, I will convince you gentlemen that this ranch will be run under a different policy and under a new management,—for that envelope, gentlemen, contains the will of the late William Sawyer leaving

his entire estate to his niece Miss Helen Sawyer."

Enthusiastic applause rent the air.

Thorpe paused for Uncle Billy to reply, but the old gentleman was scratching his head with an air of perplexity.

"I don't remember," he finally said.

"Can't you remember that envelope that Nate gave you to put in the bank?" insisted Thorpe, now very much alarmed.

"Oh!" exclaimed the old man, with a sudden relief. "Now I remember I put it in the bank as Nate told me to."

"You must be mistaken, Uncle Billy, for I inquired of Mr. Livingston and he knows nothing about it," returned Thorpe.

The men now crowded seriously about and upon many of their faces was depicted an anxiety no less than if the affair had been their very own.

"Mr. Livingston!" repeated Uncle Billy, slowly rubbing his chin. "Why damn it he don't run no bank—yes he does too, but it's a *money* bank."

"Well?" inquired Thorpe sharply.

"I took the envelope," said Uncle Billy, and takes it up to the Capitol saloon and puts it in the bank—the *faro* bank, of course."

Thorpe laughed and a yell of delight went up from the crowd.

"That's right," shouted Bill Williams. "I was

a dealin' that afternóon, and I put it in the safe with the bank-roll when I went off watch."

"And it's there yet," confirmed Billy Fidler.

At this the crowd shouted itself hoarse, and Thorpe in his excitement siezed the girl by the hand, and drawing her to the edge of the porch held aloft his hand commanding silence.

"Boys I want to introduce to you—" He was about to say, "Miss Helen Sawyer, the new boss of the WS ranch," but he got no further.

Red Angus, the Johnson county slueth understood, or thought he understood, and immediately he began a vociferous inquiry: "Where's Bill Knox? Where's Bill Knox?"

The crowd became riotous. "Bill Knox! Bill Knox!" they shouted.

There was a sudden activity upon the outskirts of the crowd and a struggling and embarrassed preacher was brought forward and lifted up upon the porch.

"Go to it, Bill!" yelled an admiring friend, "go to it!"

Mr. Knox cleared his throat a couple of times and said: "Boys I can't do it without a license."

The girl blushed and stole a look at the man by her side—a look that told him everything.

He squeezed her hand rapturously. "I'll be the first man in the court-house in the morning," he whispered.

He gazed out over the silent hills, now becoming indistinct in the fast approaching twilight, and his eye rested for the moment upon the distant dust-cloud of the wagon train bearing its prisoners forever away; he saw, standing out in gentle harmony against the azure of the sky, the snow-covered peaks of the Big Horns illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun; and then there came over him a feeling of peace and happiness such as he had never known. "The West, the West," he murmured, "how I love it!" and he drew her to him, "and you, and you!"

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